

CONVERSATIONS

WITH BILL KRISTOL

Mark Esper Conversation **Filmed April 17, 2024**

BILL KRISTOL:

Hi there. I'm Bill Kristol. Welcome back to *Conversations*. I'm very pleased to be joined today by Mark Esper, Secretary of Defense from 2019 to 2020. Before that, Secretary of the Army, way before that, West Point graduate, a combat veteran of the first Gulf War and infantry officer, distinguished career. And this is when we got to know each other, Mark. You were in the executive branch, you were on the senior positions on the Hill, private sector, and then you ended up as Secretary of the Army and Secretary of Defense under President Trump and served honorably. We can get back to that there, and you were relieved of your duties there right after the election, which for me was a huge alarm bell. Honestly, I thought, "My God, if President is removing Mark Esper, nothing good is going to happen at the Defense Department for those final two months." But anyway—

MARK ESPER:

And you know you have a good story there too.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, I do. Right? I was in a simulation in the summer of 2020, what could go wrong after election day? And I said... I was playing Trump, President Trump, and I said, "I think I'll just remove my Secretary of Defense. I think I also remove Bill Barr just to have those two agencies a little more under my direct control without the kinds of limits that you and Bill Barr would... the kinds of things you would not do that he might want to do." And everyone said on... this was on Zoom, it was during the pandemic. Everyone said, "Oh, bill, it's imaginative of you. Of course that'll never happen. But I mean, that was kind of clever of you to think of that." So there you go. Anyway, Mark, thanks for joining me and thank you for your service, honestly, to the nation.

MARK ESPER:

Oh, thank you. My privilege.

BILL KRISTOL:

And I noticed in quickly researching your career, and you were confirmed as Secretary of Defense, 90 to eight. That's impressive. That doesn't happen all the time these days.

MARK ESPER:

Yeah, not bad for my third year. I remember President Trump saying, and I write about this in my book, he said, "Yeah, 90 to 8, 90 to 8, should I be concerned that you got that many votes from Republicans and Democrats?" And I just looked at him and smiled.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, that's probably wise. A lot of them knew you had served in senior positions in the Bush administration and then on the Hill for Senator Frist and stuff. So it was a tribute actually to you that... The book *A Sacred Oath* from 2022 I think, people should read that really important, I think chronicle of the Trump years and of the actual substance of the policy decisions as well as some of the drama and all that. But we can get back to that. Let's begin in the present, we're at a very important moment. We're speaking on, what is it, Wednesday, April 17th, big debate on the Hill about aid for Ukraine, which has been delayed for a while. I mean, this is an issue you worked on a lot, both for over the years and decades, but certainly as Secretary of Defense, NATO, Ukraine, Russia. Why does it matter? How important is it? Is it really, really fundamentally important? Give me your take on this.

MARK ESPER:

Well, look, the bottom line is I do think it's very important. And why is that? I go back to the basics, right? When I came into office as Secretary of Defense, I said that my top priority would be implementing the National Defense Strategy. And the core assumption of the National Defense Strategy was we're now in this era of great power competition where our adversaries were no longer terrorist groups and insurgencies. They would still be there, but our number one concern should be China, then Russia. That's how I prioritized them. And that we would face an era where both countries would become far more aggressive. And at that point in time, as you know, Russia had already invaded Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014. So I began my tenure doing a number of things, reviewing our war plans with regard to both countries, trying to support our allies, moving troops to Europe, moving forces to Europe because my view was, it was only a matter of time.

And unfortunately, we were proven right. President Putin, Vladimir Putin, invades Ukraine, trying to seize Kyiv in a matter of days in what? February of 22. And now we've been fighting, they've been fighting for two plus years now. So it's very, very real. And it matters because we're really in an era of the autocracies versus the democracies. And the democracies are led, should be led by the United States of America. And the autocracies are led by Beijing and Moscow. And we're back to where we were when I entered West Point in 1982, we're back in a pseudo-Cold War with these major powers. And so I think it's time for us to really take on the mantle of leadership. What President Ronald Reagan... I consider myself a Reagan Republican, what he charged us all to do, and he and President George HW Bush eventually won the Cold War through that type of leadership. I think we need to get back to that.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah. I mean, Putin in a way, it's not worse than the Cold War because obviously that was a nuclear showdown between us and the Soviet Union. Russia is different, but the direct invasion of a neighbor that was pretty, the Soviets preserved their Warsaw Pact, I guess they invaded their Warsaw Pact "allies" to keep them in the pact, but they didn't really—

MARK ESPER:

They owned Ukraine then.

BILL KRISTOL:

What's that? They held Ukraine, yeah. But the actual direct invasion of a UN member state with the kind of semi-genocidal way they've conducted the war, maybe not semi,

it's pretty the largest ground war in Europe in 80 years, I think. Right? I mean, I feel it's pretty big I think. Don't you think February 24, 2022 will be like a real, genuine moment in world history?

MARK ESPER:

Yeah. Look, I think it crystallized again this notion of a new era of great power competition with Russia and China being the adversaries. And keep in mind, it was just a few weeks before the invasion that Putin and Xi Jinping, the president of China, stood side by side of all places in Beijing at the Olympics, and they issued their 5,000 word statement about their strategic partnership and alliance, and would just be a few weeks later when Russia would invade Ukraine with armored columns and mechanized troops. And it was almost like the Nazi invasion of Poland in 39. I mean, it was just kind of a blitz into Kiev. Unfortunately, the Ukrainians fought back bravely, courageously and competently and spoiled their plans. Good for them.

BILL KRISTOL:

And you all did, I think a fair amount, and maybe the [inaudible] administration had begun after 2014 to do some things too, to really build up Ukraine's military capability. I think that's under... I think that's right. That seems like it's underappreciated, actually.

MARK ESPER:

Yeah. We did a number of things, and I know you eventually want to talk about the Trump administration. I think one of the things that the Trump administration did well was approved providing javelins, for example, javelin anti-tank missiles for Ukraine. That came in very effective when the Russians invaded a few years later. But beyond that, we did a lot of training trying to bring Ukraine up to NATO standards. We had US forces, NATO forces there. I actually went to the city of Lviv in Western Ukraine where we were training them, spent a couple of days on the ground talking to Ukrainians, talking to our people. So it was a great effort. And I believe as much as the weapons, training the Ukrainians to NATO standards, NATO tactics and techniques, when they would eventually go against a Russian army still using Soviet Bloc tactics really made a big difference in the initial days of the war.

BILL KRISTOL:

That's interesting. And you had a president who was famously skeptical of NATO. You had a foreign policy establishment that was also a little bit tired maybe of NATO that seemed like something from another era. But you, I think, always put a priority on it, didn't you with Sec Def and throughout your career, I think, and I think that turned out to be right.

MARK ESPER:

Yeah. Well, I learned early on that the allies and partners matter. They're the great asymmetric advantage that the United States has. We have dozens of allies and partners being both former legal treaty partners and allies and others who are just partners. And when you look at who the other team has, the other team being Russia and China, their lineup looks like this, North Korea, Syria, Mali, Venezuela. It's not a good—

BILL KRISTOL:

Iran, Iran, Iran.

MARK ESPER:

We have a far better team, and so we have to keep them together. We have to train with them, make sure that they're interoperable. And of course, I served for a few years in Europe as Army officer in NATO. So I appreciate the alliance from that perspective. But look, I was also willing to be critical and still am about our NATO allies not spending enough on defense and not doing more to make sure that they're combat ready. Because if you're truly combat ready effective, there's no greater deterrent than to have that capability.

BILL KRISTOL:

I guess Iran would be the other country that's part of the Alliance League.

MARK ESPER:

Yeah, absolutely.

BILL KRISTOL:

And pretty important it turns out in terms of what they can provide in the drones and stuff.

MARK ESPER:

Yeah, no, it's really evolved, accelerated over the past couple of years. They're subordinate, but not like a third tier player here that maybe Mali or Nicaragua is, or Cuba. I mean, they really have become an industrial base, at least for Russia, in terms of providing drones and missiles and items like that. We know North Korea is doing the same. So we're seeing a degree of cooperation between these countries that we've never seen before, and we should be concerned about that.

BILL KRISTOL:

I think people would be interested just people haven't served in the Pentagon as you have, certainly not at your levels. Secretary of Army, Secretary of Defense, I mean... I don't know. What was your day as Secretary of Defense if I could just divert to that for a few minutes and then we'll get to some of the substantive issues about both the past and the future? But I mean, people don't have a sense. I mean, it's such a massive enterprise, even I don't know. I've served in the executive branch obviously, but I don't even quite have a sense of what you do. How do you think about even being Sec Def?

MARK ESPER:

Well, for some biographical information to kind of set the stage, I went to West Point, spent 21 years in the Army, 10 on active duty, 11 in the Guard Reserve. And then, as you mentioned earlier, I did my time on the Hill and then served as a Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense during the George W. Bush administration. So when you trace back the individual steps, I'd actually served in the Pentagon five times total. I knew my way around the building from various different perspectives as an army officer, as a mid-level civilian appointee, and eventually as Secretary of the Army and Secretary of Defense, so I knew the pace and how it worked and how to pull the levers. But look, a standard day is not unlike a CEO's day, if you will. I'd get in there early after going to the gym, early being at 7:30, and the first thing you typically do is read intelligence, catch up on what happened the night before, and then a series of meetings.

And depending on the day of the week, it would be anything from, again, reviewing war plans to reviewing or looking at what some members of Congress are concerned about. It might be White House meetings on a pending policy choice, dealing with NATO or Iran or something like that. But the day usually runs pretty long. I used to try and wrap up by 6:00 PM because I knew that I could stay longer, but there were hundreds of people waiting for me to leave that had to do the cleanup work, the administrative stuff after I left. I learned that years earlier as a captain on the Army staff at the Pentagon. And so I tried to get out of there every day by 6:00. I'd carry a big bag of work home, I'd get home, eat dinner, and I would read and write and sign memos for the next two hours.

So it was a long day and it would extend it to the weekends. But look, that's the nature of public service. I'm sure Lloyd Austin is going through that now, and my predecessors did also. You throw on top of that foreign travel, because a big part of the Secretary of Defense's job, unlike the service secretaries, which I was Secretary of the Army, is there's a big foreign policy dynamic. And that means going over it and meeting not just your counterparts in countries, but also the heads of state, the prime ministers.

And so that was a big part of the job that often gets overlooked. And you really have to balance that out because we do have a Secretary of State who that's his primary job, exclusive job. So foreign policy is a big part of it. And then of course, trying to answer the media, talk to the media, think tank appearances to talk about policy issues. All those things kind of get factored in. So it's quite a task. There's a big staff that kind of help make you successful. But the great thing about the Pentagon, it's staffed by so many wonderful people who are committed to the nation's defense, and that makes long days all the more easier.

BILL KRISTOL:

Even when I came to Washington in my first job at the education department, tiny, tiny, tiny compared to the Pentagon, and I was Bill Bennett's assistant and the chief of staff. I guess I had not... I studied politics. I taught at the Kennedy School. I didn't really appreciate what it was to try to run a department, deal with the Hill, which has legitimate oversight and then annoying oversight of one zone of everything you're doing, and that meant dealing individually with members and of course testifying and that kind of thing, dealing with the media, dealing in your case with foreign governments, dealing with the inter-agency process, which is extremely complex and time-consuming, both formal and informal, you can say a word about that, at your level, the cabinet level with Secretary of State and intelligence agencies, everyone, I mean, it's just so many different spokes, I think that's a little different. CEOs have some of that, but it's all these different actors who have legitimate claims on your attention, it's not that they're just... Now, that part, I remember, just hadn't fully appreciated until I got to Washington.

MARK ESPER:

Yeah, I think that is a striking difference with a CEO or the head of any kind of company or association is there are so many stakeholders up and down the chain of command. Externally, I mentioned think tanks and associations and members of Congress and labor unions and companies who are part of the defense industrial base and venture firms, what I'm doing now. I mean, all these people are in that system and you have to figure out how do you allocate your time? It's the most precious thing you have is allocating your time to hear about an issue, to try and solve a problem and do so

in a way that gives you the greatest return on investment, and that is how you think about every day.

And then on top of that, you have the things that just happened out of the blue. I describe in my memoir how I had returned from a meeting and was trying to catch up on some things. And next thing I know, my chief of staff burst into the room. I just thought it was kind of some internal issue that popped up or the White House was calling, but he pops into the room and says, "Secretary, we need to get you to the command post or to this office very quickly, 'cause we have a civilian airline or civilian plane that's in the National Defense Airspace and we can't contact it and you may have to shoot it down in the next three or four minutes." And that'll get your attention pretty quickly, Bill.

And fortunately, we rehearse these things and we were able to solve it, but it's just stuff like that that no CEO is going to have to deal with or anybody for that matter, but that's what you have to be prepared for. And that was not unique, that happened more than once on my watch and other things happen as well that just pop up in the news. So more often than not, you're addressing problems and putting out fires. And that's the nature of the job though, the tough things get pushed up and that's what you accept when you take these jobs.

BILL KRISTOL:

I'm curious, just maybe one last question about the Pentagon in general, I mean, we're on the spectrum of, it's a pretty amazing machine that has very good people working there. As you said, both civilian and military has figured out how to do an awful lot of things over the years and decades and it needs competent management, God knows and sound policy direction and ethical policy direction and so forth. But it runs well to the other side of this argument, which is serious [inaudible], it needs pretty big reform, it's very slow to change, it procures weapons that would've been useful 15 years ago, it's hard to shake things up. What's the sort of balance of truth between those two polls?

MARK ESPER:

Yeah, look, the answer in some ways is both. Look, it's all staffed by great people, both military and civilian alike. They're all committed, they spend long hours at the job and do some extraordinary things. But when you go back a step to what we were just talking about, because there are so many stakeholders, there are offices covering each one of those stakeholders and their issues. So my staff, my office of the Secretary of Defense staff was numbered in the 1000s.

But you need that type of process, that kind of staff to make sure that you've checked every box, answered any question. And I think generally they produce very good options and solutions, but because they're so thorough and it's so big, it takes time, which is good when you're thinking about long-term important decisions that you have time to think about. But if it's something, if you're in a crisis or you need speed, it's not as adept at that. And so in some ways, we're too slow. And that problem, in some ways is dictated by Congress when you talk about weapons procurement, because while the Pentagon can make a decision to buy a new weapon, it still takes 18 to 24 months to program it, to put it into your budget proposal, to send that budget proposal to the hill. And then Congress considers it for a year and then finally passes an authorization bill and end of an appropriations bill. But again, you're talking about two years to bring something to just approve the funding for it, let alone kind of start a production and everything.

And that is the biggest challenge or one of the biggest challenges we face these days, and it's been exposed by the war in Ukraine and exacerbated by what's happening in the Middle East that we just simply can't keep pace on the production of arms and ammunition that we need for not just these conflicts, but for, God forbid, a future one with China.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, how worried are you about that? I mean, our friend Eric Edelman, I've done several conversations with him, and he made the same point you just did that particularly the... Everyone assumes we should appropriate the money and we should not have political problems with that. But even if we do, it's not as if our defense industrial base is all where it should be in terms of producing what we need to produce. And of course, our allies isn't either. How much of a priority should that be building up a really serious defense industrial base and also technology base that's within the country, or whether we have very sure access to in terms of future challenges?

MARK ESPER:

Well, let's go back to the threat first, I don't think a conflict with China is imminent, and it's not necessarily inevitable. But if the trend lines continue, if the Chinese economy continues to suffer, if Xi Jinping thinks that he's losing control of the country, maybe he'll try and do something. Maybe he'll just try to do something with Taiwan because he wants it to be part of his legacy, and we know that he wants to be in the pantheon of great Chinese leaders like Mao. So you have to plan prudently. Now, when you get to our side of things, again, the Pentagon can certainly do more to move quickly, but in this case, I put a lot of it on Congress. I think if we go back to corporate America, none of the handcuffs that are placed on a CEO that DOD faces, a CEO can shift directions pretty quickly using his or her corporate money to invest in something new or to explore an innovation or increase production. We don't have that flexibility at DOD.

For some small amounts of money you do, but for really making a material difference, you have to go back to Congress and get approval by four different committees, and it's a long laborious process. And then there's the annual allocation of funds. And Congress is very reluctant to do what's called multi-year funding. And for corporate America, for the defense industrial base, if you really think you need... I believe we need to increase production to do that, in some cases you need to double or triple shifts or you need to build a new production line or maybe even a new factory. But a defense company's not going to do that unless they can see a steady stream of revenue coming in based on sales that stretches in the years, 'cause you got to pay that off. And we're just not giving corporate America that degree of predictability and clarity on funding.

So we really got to get that fixed because look, if we get into a shooting war with China, we're going to expend a lot of ammunition, a lot of weapons, very, very quickly, and so will they. The difference is they have a very large manufacturing base, the Chinese Communist Party can move on a dime, it can pivot on a dime, and they'll be able to do things I'm afraid more quickly than we can. And then the question is, who can rebuild, refit, rearm real quick and go back at it again? And that's where I get very concerned. So I think we need to build a better, a quicker defense industrial base, we need to start stockpiling arms and ammunition, and we need our allies to do it the same, not just our European allies, but our Indo-Pacific allies as well.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah. And I guess the Ukraine war suggests that it's not just, even if we don't get directly into a shooting war, if we're supplying an ally who's fighting an adversary, there too the strains can show up pretty quickly. It's been two years, which is a heck of a long time if you're in Ukraine and the suffering they've gone through and all that. But on the other hand, it could go on for longer and other things could pop up elsewhere as we saw in the Middle East. And I do feel like people just aren't... I don't know, how much do you think people in foreign policy, defense policy world have pivoted to this new world that we're in? The superpower competition, people use that phrase, but really the integrated or the way in which Russia and China help each other? Iran helps them both. Who knows how much real coordination there is, but at least there's opportunistic, I'd say coordination and taking advantage of things. I sort of feel like we're part way to coming to grips with this new moment, but still a little bit living in the 2000s or 2010s.

MARK ESPER:

Yeah, I think we could really use a greater sense of urgency in Washington about these matters, again, within the Pentagon and certainly on Capitol Hill. I mean, look, Congress has been dithering for months now with regard to this latest spending package for Ukraine, which also includes, by the way, Israel, Taiwan, et cetera. So there's that. I think we should up our game there, but more puzzlingly is Europe. I mean, they have Russia invading a neighboring country right on their doorstep. And if you look at all, now 32 allies, some are really doing a great job, they've increased their defense spending significantly. Poland, for example, is above 4%. You have some of the Baltic countries, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, who have high levels of defense spending and who are contributing as a percent of GDP more than the United States is to the Ukrainian war effort. But then you look at other parts of the alliance, those countries that are further away from Russia, and you just see no change. I mean, even Canada is still spending 1.2% of its GDP on defense. I mean everybody in the alliance, but particularly the European countries who are nearby, you would think they would be far more alarmed and increasing rapidly their defense budgets to really meet the threat.

This is where I give Japan credit, I think Prime Minister Kishida a couple years ago announced that Japan would double its defense spending from 1% to 2%, and you think about a 1% increase for a country that's the fourth-largest economy in the world, that's a big increase. And plus, they made decisions to acquire counterstrike land attack cruise missiles, big change from where their constitutional foundations have been with regard to these matters. So you see some countries taking it very, very seriously, and you see others not so, and I think we all need to have that collective sense that we are in a new era, we're going to have to get back to higher levels of defense spending no matter if we would prefer otherwise. And America and a few countries just can't carry all this weight. The voters just will not suffer that, and I think we'll talk about that, you'll see Trump tapping into that notion as well.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, they need to do more, but they can't really ultimately do it without us either. So it's a—

MARK ESPER:

That's right.

BILL KRISTOL:

We need both to... I mean, the Japanese Prime Minister was kind of remarkable when he was here. Again, it wasn't commented on that much, he spoke to Congress, but I'd say he did stress the importance of winning in Ukraine or defeating Putin. I mean, that's from the Asia, some of the China Hawks want to distinguish Asia from Europe, and we should just focus on Asia and let Europe kind of fall apart. He rejected that pretty strongly, and he didn't have to, so to speak. He was speaking to the US Congress and he really wanted to make that point. The other thing is, you know better than I mean, going from 1% to 2% doesn't sound like that much in a funny way, but for them psychologically, that's a huge jump.

MARK ESPER:

Absolutely.

BILL KRISTOL:

That 1% has been kind of a pacifist Japan post-World War II thing-

MARK ESPER:

That's right.

BILL KRISTOL:

...for 80 years.

MARK ESPER:

Yeah, it's more than just a number, it is a psychological threshold. It's a different footing, and it's sending a message. I mean, who else are they making that announcement about? It's clearly, North Korea is a threat to them, but they've been dealing with North Korea for decades. It's really about China and it's about China, Chinese Coast Guard, Chinese naval vessels in Japanese waters, in Japanese exclusive economic zones, sailing around the Senkakus, which I think the Japanese recognizes. And by the way, it's not just them who are saying fund Ukraine, it's Taiwan too is saying, because they recognize the common principle at stake here. And the common principle is this, if a big authoritarian neighbor invades a smaller democracy for the sole purpose of seizing that territory and incorporating it into their own domain, we need to fight for those principles or else the global order that we've known that's produced peace and prosperity for the last 75 plus years is going to wither away. And that's not the world we want to live in when we're living under Chinese values and Chinese interests. It'll be a far different world for our grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

BILL KRISTOL:

Or a world in which Putin could just invade a neighbor and slaughter people and then get away with it, keep a good chunk of the territory or all of it. Yeah.

MARK ESPER:

After World War II we said never again, right?

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah. Yeah. So I mean, just to transition to President Trump a little bit, I mean, you've eloquently articulated this view that I certainly agree with, and the President doesn't really quite agree with that in terms of the importance of the post-World War II global

order, the US centrality, the importance of the Allies. I mean, you've worked with them closely and you, as I say, I think helped him do some good things and stopped him from doing some things he shouldn't have done. But in foreign policy, I guess, what would a Trump second term look like in your view, and I guess especially given the centrality of Ukraine and NATO?

MARK ESPER:

Well, look, I think you have to take President Trump and any leader for that matter at their word, and Trump has been explicit with regard to what he would do. With Ukraine, he said he'd cut off funding, cut off support, and he would negotiate an agreement within 24 hours.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, what is that?

MARK ESPER:

Which is fancy fool. The only person who could stop this war in 24 hours is Vladimir Putin. But he's also attacked NATO, said it's not a good deal for the United States and had made attempts during his first term to undermine the alliance. So look, I take him at face value for his view on those. He said similar things about our allies in Asia. So I think he would pursue those things in a second term because he's unbound by the need to kind of play to a reelection, because there will not be another term after that.

And so then the other big question becomes, who does he put in his cabinet? Myself and Mike Pompeo and John Bolton would talk him out of these things or at times when it came to funding Ukraine, trying to talk him into providing funding for Ukraine. So a key part here is one him, but the opposite side of the coin are who are the people he brings around him at both the Departments of State, Defense and elsewhere, but also in the White House because the people there have a big influence on him as well. So those are unknowns that we should be concerned about as this election unfolds.

BILL KRISTOL:

They're unknowns, but my feeling is the odds are pretty good that it would tip much more to the kinds of people he put in after you left and after John Bolton left and after Bill Barr left even, justice, as opposed to you guys, in a sense, I think he thinks you, and he said this, that you all constrained him and didn't let him really pursue the America first agenda and all that.

MARK ESPER:

Yeah, look, loyalty will be the number one attribute. And look, when you take these jobs, there is a degree of loyalty, support of the President that comes with it. But it's not unconditional, it's not unqualified. Your first loyalty is to the Constitution, to the American people, which is kind of how I drew my lines. But I think his standard is loyalty to him no matter what, no matter the issue. And so the question will be is who does he bring in? And if that's the type of people they are, what is going to bind them? At least in the military, you have a professional military class who understands what its ethics are, what the norms are, the proper behavior between civilians and the military, and I think they will hold the line. But the civilian Secretary of Defense has a lot of power. I've tried to emphasize this multiple times. There's only two people in the United States of America that can deploy United States forces, the President and the Secretary of Defense, not the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, not the Vice

President, it's only the President and the Secretary of Defense. So it's an immensely powerful position, and there's other things that come with that responsibility too. So these decisions on personnel will be very, very important. And that should concern us, again.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah. And I think you were alarmed, as I was, when you were relieved and the kinds of people that President Trump wanted to bring in there, and some of who he did bring in, maybe there was enough pushback that he couldn't quite do what he wanted to do. But you signed that letter on the very beginning of January of 2021, reminding, I guess all living former Secretaries of Defense did, reminding everyone that the military could not be used for political ends and so forth. Talk a little bit about that. I was very struck by that. I thought, man, if Mark Esper and Dick Cheney and people like that, or Bob Gates are signing a letter like this, they're alarmed. And if they're alarmed, I'm alarmed. It's not the kind of thing you just do easily.

MARK ESPER:

Yeah, no, I think it was January 4th that we wrote that piece. We agreed on it. I had a hand in editing it and writing it. And it was remarkable that you had all of us sign on, the eight or nine at the time, probably the first time ever all living Secretaries of Defense, from both parties, by the way. So it was myself and Bill Cohen and Bob Gates and Leon Panetta. I mean, it ran the whole gamut, Republicans, Democrats and Republicans who work for Democrats. But I think one thing we all share is we know that there's a responsibility that comes with being Secretary of Defense and for running the Pentagon that says, you are going to be apolitical to the degree that where it matters, certainly for sure. And so there's this sense of apolitical and your responsibility and staying out of politics, particularly for the military. And so that's kind of what brought us together, particularly as things unfolded and as the election denialism continued, there was a growing concern that, would the military get involved?

And we all know now that there was that, I guess a meeting in late December with I think maybe it was Mike Flynn and others who said, "Yeah, maybe we should send the military in to seize ballot boxes or to conduct another election." I can't recall the details, but it was quite alarming that the military would be put in that context.

I was concerned going into the fall that the military would be used at the time of the election when the results were revealed to put down protests to do other things and so that became more of my concern, immediate concern at that point in time. And of course, I don't think anybody envisioned that the weeks and months after November 2020 would happen the way they did. In my lifetime, if you had told me five, 10, 15, 20 years ago that there would be an insurrection on Capitol Hill and people would storm the Capitol and try and seize ballot boxes and threaten to hang Mike Pence, the vice president, it would be like a bad Hollywood movie. But it was real, and it should be a wake-up call for all of us.

BILL KRISTOL:

Well, to your credit, and you discussed this in the book at some length, in the spring/summer of 2020, you decided, I think in certain red lines that you needed to really be careful about, not just observing it yourself, of course you observed it yourself, but making sure that the Defense Department was not misused, that the military was not used inappropriately, that it wasn't politicized and used. Everyone was

surprised, of course, by January 6th, but you were aware of the dangers, I'd say, of what might happen.

MARK ESPER:

Yeah, I ended up calling them the four no's. As you said, it was no politicization of the military, no strategic retreats, no misuse of the military. And of course, the fourth one would flee from my mind—

BILL KRISTOL:

No aggressive war. No [inaudible].

MARK ESPER:

Yeah, no unnecessary wars. Because there were people within the administration in the year of 2020 who were, for one reason or another, the National Security Advisor wanted to go after Iran or go after Venezuela or do this or do that, and skipping over diplomacy and sanctions and everything else that might happen to use the military, and I was very concerned about us being used in, us being DOD, being used in that way, but also with not looking at other options, but also as a political tool. And so there was that.

And what happened at Lafayette Park, Mark Milley and I we're duped, but it was, look, we should have had better political antennae. We recalibrated that point, and that's where we came up with the four no's. And I said, "I've got to get to the election." My timeline was get to the election. My red lines were the four no's, and my strategy was to play defense on the outside and offense on the inside.

So offense on the inside meant within DOD, within the Pentagon, I wanted to keep forward moving all the initiatives I had underway to modernize the military, to focus on China, to improve the lives of our service members, go as hard as I could, play offense for the next six or seven months, but outside the Pentagon, be in a far more defensive stance, be far more calibrated to people trying to use DOD for political reasons, and so that became my strategy. And then my goal eventually became, got to get to the election, get to the election, and let the American people make the choice. And whatever happens after that, I didn't think I would be able to hold on any longer. And I was largely correct in that estimation.

BILL KRISTOL:

I think you wrote your resignation letter before the president tweeted that you were going to be removed, right?

MARK ESPER:

Well, I did have the outlines of one, but my view was, and it was actually tempered by folks, I talked a lot with Bob Gates and Leon Panetta and other predecessors, Colin Powell and at these very difficult times in the summer of 2020, because you want to get advice from people who were in those positions, who held those jobs, who can give you the best recommendations because they've been there, but also have the advantage of being from the outside looking in. And to a person, to a man, they said, "Nope, don't resign," because that was my inclination, it was Mark Milley's inclination. They said, "Make him fire you. Do what you need to do, make him fire you," and that's the way to hold on and execute your strategy. And I did follow that, and it was the right way to go. And so I actually did not intend to resign, but I did want to have something ready in

case I was asked to do something that I thought was immoral or illegal or something like that and there was no other way out of it, I would have to resign.

BILL KRISTOL:

Say a word about, and I think people don't understand fully how the Secretary of Defense, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, the Civil-Military relations side of it, I mean, you and General Milley worked very closely together on these kinds of things, as well, as many other things, I'm sure. But the Sec Def is... And people have great faith in the military, which I think is good and mostly justified. But the civilian leadership matters, right? I mean, it also affects who the military leadership is since the civilian leadership appoints ultimately the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs and the combatant commanders and so forth and promotes generals and all. But just say a little more about that. People don't, I think... They got to think, Pentagon, military, and they forget that there's civilian control.

MARK ESPER:

Yeah, it's a mistaken notion. And look, we know why, because the association's Pentagon, military, uniforms, generals, admirals. But most, if not all the power is vested in civilians, and certainly with the Secretary of Defense you have quite a lot of power and authority. The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the joint chiefs themselves, the joint staff, they're all advisors. They play a functional role providing a military perspective, a military recommendation to their civilian overseers. So the Undersecretary for Policy, the Undersecretary for Research and Engineering, they have military people on their staff, but as advisors and General Milley was my principal advisor. He was also the principal advisor to the president under the law and the National Security Council. But they have no authority to deploy troops to make contracting decisions, things like that.

Now, I don't mean to downplay that because they have a lot of informal authority, but it's important to understand that the power is invested in civilian leaders. That's kind of the form of government that we developed over 200 plus years that said, civilian control of the military matters. And we've adhered strictly to that code, and of course that developed other norms and procedures around that to make sure that that divide, that respect, that relationship is nurtured.

And that was why one of my four no's was don't politicize DOD, the military, because I didn't want that broken down between us. And look, I had a great partner in Mark Milley and fortunate, and people forget this, that he and I had served together for two years in the Army. He was Chief of Staff of the Army, and I was Secretary of the Army, so we had built up a rapport that we kind of knew how each other thought about things. We discussed issues all the time. And so having him by my side in that role during the tough days, particularly of 2020, was invaluable. And we kind of weathered a lot together during that time.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, that's so interesting. And I guess also your relationship with Mike Pompeo, with Gina Haspel and the intelligence community, say a word about how much you all... People think of you as each meeting with the president or the president presiding over something in the Sit Room, which you see famous photos of, whether it was in the Biden or the Trump Administration or every administration, but you all had a huge amount of contact with each other and coordination with each other.

MARK ESPER:

Well, when it comes to foreign policy, national security, the power players are State and Defense. If you had to think about another agency just writ large, it would be DOJ and Treasury. So those are the big four in that tiering. CIA was there not in a policy role, but DOD particularly worked very closely with the CIA. I had a good relationship with Gina Haspel. So many of our service members, our special operations command in particular, worked with her people, a lot of intelligence sharing. So it was a very, very close relationship there. As you said, with Mike Pompeo, he and I went to West Point together. We were classmates, have a lot of mutual friends. He and I knew each other beforehand. I kind of knew where he came from. I knew what his true north was, his azimuth, and so we got along really well, a lot of cooperation between DOD. Bill, you know the history of this pretty well.

More often than not, there were bad relations between DOD and State. You go back to the Weinberger days as notable, but Mike and I got along really well. There were times he would do things that would help out DOD immensely, maybe at the expense of State and vice versa. But I thought that was another very important partnership where he and I could have candid discussions, worked well together, came in particularly handy during the attacks in late December 2019 against the Shia militia groups, and then, of course, the killing of Soleimani. I'm always reminded of when our embassy was under siege, Mike Pompeo calling me up and saying, "Look, I need help here and here." I said, "Mike, you got it. I'm sending in the Marines here. I'm going to send in the paratroopers there. Tell your ambassador to hold on, help is on the way." We quickly deployed troops, and these were decisions he and I made together without going to the President, but knowing, of course, the President would fully support it. So having that type of trust and relationship made a big difference.

BILL KRISTOL:

It really brings home how important, though, those senior civilian positions are. Also, in terms of just DOD for a second, it's not like the military isn't affected in terms of internal promotions, internal rules and regulations. Of course, those are also ultimately in civilian control, so different kinds of secretary of defense responding to a president who's unleashed, so to speak, could change things within the military as well as the relations between the political officials in the military.

MARK ESPER:

Sure. Look, at the end of the day, for senior officers that have to go up for Senate confirmation, even for any officer, frankly, they're all subject to confirmation by the Senate. The president can put anybody on that list he wants or pull anybody from that list he wants. Certainly, with the most senior folks, I would make sure that it was the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff or service chief that I would make my recommendation to the president. I would interview with him once I'd done my interviews, but it's the president's choice, and I always thought that to be the case. So a president can pick who he wants, and so that's another important function there when you get to that level.

BILL KRISTOL:

The White House staff, I'm just curious, having been on the White House side of this and in a much lesser role as Vice President Corral's Chief of Staff, but how intrusive can they be into this, or do they—

MARK ESPER:

You worked there, so you recall, look, there is a role for the White House. There is a degree of vetting where—

BILL KRISTOL:

That's an unusual statement by a Sec staff. That's really nice of you to say that.

MARK ESPER:

I'm going to bounce the equation here in a second. There is a role for the White House. It's fine. They're looking out for the president's interests. They're doing a second check. That's fine. I'm not going to argue with that. But I will not be the first Sec Def to complain as I did oftentimes, and as I talk about my book, of meddling in the internal affairs of the Pentagon, trying to get too involved, particularly from the National Security Council, particularly from the national security advisor, that's a constant problem. My view is that the National Security Council staff is too big. It needs to be shrunk down some. But look, at the end of the day, my sense was always that the administrations that run best are the ones that pick good cabinet secretaries, good deputy secretaries, good top-tier people and let them run their departments consistent with what the president has laid out in both his campaign and in his various strategy and policy documents. When you start getting meddling from the White House, you're really eroding the authority and ability of the departments to move quickly and effectively to implement the president's agenda.

BILL KRISTOL:

For staff to be butting in, national security advisor, that's more of a contest among equals in a certain way. They have the NSC as a role, of course, National Security Council. But I also was struck, see when I was there, and it must've been much more the case when you went into the Trump Administration. The meddling personnel and junior appointments, the attempt to bring in favorites, to do things in jobs, that could make a big difference, though, even then you can't supervise every single thing that happens in some part of the Pentagon that could be quite sensitive, though. I think people don't quite appreciate how risky some of that can be.

MARK ESPER:

Some of those people on the National Security Council staff are brought in from the agencies. It's a rotation. They come in from state or defense or the intelligence community. Look, they do a good job, but others are political appointees that are either on NSC or other parts of the White House staff. That's where it got really tricky with President Trump. You never knew who was going in before you or after you and saying, "Hey, that's wrong," or, "He's wrong," or, "DOD should do this." During the final year, it became very explicit that people, the NSC had their own views and were pushing hard to implement them despite what Defense or Defense and State were saying, and sometimes they were outlandish ideas.

That's what, again, concerns me when we talk about a second Trump term is not just who will he put at the cabinet departments, but who's going to flesh out the NSC? Who's going to flesh out the White House staff? Those people are there all the time in the White House. That Oval Office was like a sieve with people going back and forth talking to the president. That's a problem for any administration because... And Trump of course, was vulnerable to the last person who put a bad idea in his head of moving out with that.

BILL KRISTOL:

It does seem to me, and obviously I've never been a fan of his, but early on, he must have had a sense maybe more in 2017, 2019, more in 2019, as you've said, though, than 2020, that he doesn't know everything. He does need some professionals around him. He would sometimes at least often take their advice or look the other way as you didn't quite do things that he had off the cuff wanted you to do or whatever and so forth. But it does feel like since 2020, that process, let's say, of liberating himself from these different constraints and guardrails I would call them has accelerated. If anything, it hasn't gone back. He didn't rethink everything after January 6, 2021 and say, "You know what? I should have listened to Mike Pence. I should have listened to Mark Esper. I should have listened to Bill Barr. I shouldn't have gone down any of these paths."

MARK ESPER:

Well, look, every president learns on a job. There's no training to be president, although, some have less of a learning curve than others. George, again, H.W. Bush, who knew D.C., he knew the instruments of government is an example of somebody who had less of a learning curve. So I don't fault a president for learning on the job. Trump did not take those lessons as well. Look, in many ways, things we were recommending pushing back against proved to be true. I often wonder whether he looks back and says, "Thank goodness they were pushing back on me." The best example is Afghanistan. Trump was constantly pushing to get out of Afghanistan, withdraw our troops.

And as I talk about in a later chapter of my book, in October of 2020, before the election, he's going out there publicly buttressed by his national security advisor saying, "We need to get out by Christmas," two months away, 2 1/2 months away, which was logistically impossible to do unless you left everything there and just put soldiers on planes and left, and we cautioned against that. I wrote a classified memo at the end of October saying we shouldn't go below 4,500 troops unless the Taliban does this or that or this or that. I've said publicly that I thought we should have used military pressure to get them to abide by the agreement. If not, we could have returned forces.

But anyway, so the bottom line is we talked him out of a rapid precipitous withdrawal from Afghanistan only to see what, 7, 8, 9, 10 months later Biden do the exact same thing, a rapid withdrawal from Afghanistan. The place falls apart. We have 13 brave U.S. service members killed. We have any number of Americans left behind. It was complete disaster. It will exceed in terms of a dismal moment in our foreign policy what we did in Saigon in what, '75? But we talked Trump out of that, and that was just one example of where I think this staff role is important. In the second term, the question gets back to will people be there to talk him out of bad ideas? His instincts weren't necessarily wrong to want to get out of Afghanistan. In many ways, I shared that view. I talk about it in the book, but how you get out of Afghanistan under what terms and conditions matters, and that's where the nuance often gets missing.

BILL KRISTOL:

Certainly in the campaign, as you said at the very beginning, we'll close with this, he says what he means usually, fairly for a politician who's candid in his own way. He certainly hasn't shown much instinct to go back towards, let's say, the Mark Esper, Mike Pompeo, Mike Pence view of the world, and more of an instinct to double down on America First, and it's different, whatever that means, but it's different iterations. Don't you think, like the allies especially?

MARK ESPER:

Well, I've said this before, I talk about it in my book, and I think it's apparent now. When you see the polling, there are a lot of Republicans who want to see Trump reelected because they recall more favorable times than what they're seeing today. The Trump Administration pursued policy objectives that were consistent with what a lot of former conservative Republicans would've pursued as well, a conservative court, deregulation, lowering of taxes, an aggressive foreign policy. Trump sought to rebuild the military and did so for the first two or three years, securing the border, things like that. The challenge was that too often he would go too far.

Look, I completely agree that we should push the allies in Europe, and Asia, by the way, to spend more on defense, to do more. But you don't go so far as to threaten to undermine NATO or to pull out, things like that. So again, I think in many cases his instincts were right. There were accomplishments during that administration, but there were guard rails in place, guard rail number one being the prospect of reelection, and number two being the people he brought in around him. Some of those guard rails won't be there in number two. So will we get traditional Republican foreign policies or will we get a distorted version of that in the second going?

BILL KRISTOL:

I'll let you go. I know you have a plane to catch. I think that second guard rail was more important versus than the first. The reelection thing, you could tell him stuff and maybe some of these things would be popular getting out of Afghanistan. You don't give yourself and your colleagues enough credit for stopping some of these things. Then particularly not just some bad foreign policy decisions, but the really crucial non-politicization of the military and non-misuse of the military, which again, some of that's beneath the surface, but became pretty obvious once you left the Pentagon the kinds of things that could happen. The people who succeeded you had been there for a year, not for two months.

MARK ESPER:

Right.

BILL KRISTOL:

Right? What does that look like? Mark Esper, thank you very much for your service to the country, and thank you for joining me here on *Conversations*.

MARK ESPER:

Thanks, Bill. I enjoyed it. Great conversation, so good luck to you and your audience.

BILL KRISTOL:

Thanks. Thanks, Mark, and thank you for joining us on *Conversations*.