

CONVERSATIONS

WITH BILL KRISTOL

BILL KRISTOL:

Hi, I'm Bill Kristol. Welcome back to *Conversations*. Very pleased to be joined again today by Bob Kagan. We had an excellent conversation, maybe even less than a year ago, I think, about his second volume of his work on history of American foreign policy, *The Ghost at the Feast*, which covers the years 1900 to 1941, which I highly recommend in case people haven't quite gotten around to reading it yet.

And now Bob's out with a very topical book, a shorter book. So you need to read that. If you want, you could even read this first before you spend all summer on *Ghost at the Feast*. And this book is called *Rebellion: How Anti-Liberalism is Tearing America Apart Again*. And I want talk about the book but talk about things beyond the book, obviously. And Bob, thanks for joining me again.

ROBERT KAGAN:

It's a pleasure, Bill. Thanks.

BILL KRISTOL:

So I thought we'd talk a second about anti-liberalism and then about the *Again* part of the title, which is I think a key to the argument of the book. But you wrote a piece, and let me put the anti-liberalism thing this way: we've spoken, I think quite a lot, about the illiberalism of the current authoritarian movement on the right. You wrote a controversial piece. Was it 2016 I think?... where you said, "It's worth calling it fascism of a distinctively American sort," but still use that term. And then there was big controversy about that, and has been for years. So tell me a little, why anti-liberalism as opposed to illiberalism on the one hand, which is very commonly used, or fascism, which I suppose is a little more provocative?

ROBERT KAGAN:

Well, it's just a word, but what I'm trying to get to is that there is a real ideological opposition to liberalism, obviously in the world historically, and also in the United States. And the thing about illiberalism is it sounds like people are misbehaving potentially without realizing it, or they're not behaving in a liberal fashion but it doesn't suggest that they are hostile to liberalism. And that's the point I'm trying to get to, because I think this book was written backwards.

When I write histories I write them forwards and try to understand, get into the... but this time I was trying to answer a question. And the question is, why are so many people supporting a guy who evidently wishes to overthrow the nature of our system? A guy who has proven to be willing to be a dictator. And I think that part of the answer is that a very large number of people, larger than we may have thought, really does want to change the nature of our system. And I don't mean change it from the Democratic Party, but change the system that the founders created. Some people are very frank about this, people like Patrick Deneen, people like Adrian Vermeule at Harvard, people who call themselves post-liberals.

They are actively opposed to the founders' liberalism. And I think that a lot of people wouldn't articulate it that way. They may not even realize they're opposed to the founders' liberalism. But a lot of people who I think are fairly characterized as white nationalists, or at least certainly have an ethno-religious interpretation of what America is, that is an alternative to the founders' universalist vision. And so I think we have to accept that people are not just stumbling, blindly following Trump. There is a real movement, a very powerful movement, that supports Trump, that really would like to see a change in the way America operates.

BILL KRISTOL:

And that movement has American roots, not just... and here's where I guess maybe the fascism term conveys Europe, rightly or wrongly I suppose. And that seems to be the argument you're making, is there are real American roots to this anti-liberalism. So many historians, and you discuss this, have written about the liberal tradition in America. I was certainly brought up on a lot of those books in college. And some of them, they're very interesting and important. But I guess this gets to the *Again* in your title. There's an anti-liberal tradition in America as well.

ROBERT KAGAN:

Right. And let me just say a word about fascism. I think the problem when you say, "Fascism," is you think of people who speak German and have mustaches or people who speak Italian and make the trains run on time. But fascism is the malady of popular government, of a popular era. You're not going to have a dictator claim divine right in most cases. They're not going to establish a monarchy in what has become a popular age, certainly since the early 19th century.

Even dictators have to win the allegiance of a certain number of people, especially if they're operating within democracies. And that's what Trump has succeeded in doing. And I think that what makes it fascist is the sort of blind loyalty to an individual leader, almost irrespective of ideology but certainly anti-liberal. Mussolini declared openly that he was opposed to liberalism, he was opposed to democracy. And I think we don't say that as frankly in the United States, but that's here.

But yes, there is a peculiar element. America is special, and the thing about America is that it's absolutely tangled up. All these questions are tangled up with the fundamental issue of race. And that is more true in the United States than it is in Europe. Europe has its own historical issues, but in the United States the issue has been race. And the anti-liberalism is primarily a rejection of liberalism's leveling quality. It is destructive of hierarchies, of all hierarchies, including family hierarchies. And it's destructive of tradition. And I think a lot of people are trying to hold onto traditions that are gradually undermined in a liberal system.

Now, they can be replaced by other traditions. The United States doesn't prevent people from, obviously, worshiping as they choose, unlike, for instance, the French Revolution and the Bolshevik Revolution, which really was very hostile and sought to eradicate religion from their society. That's not the American approach. But if people want to have a traditional Christian life, and not only for themselves but in society at large, and that is what a lot of Americans want, that is fundamentally contrary to what the founders intended and contrary to liberalism as the founders established it.

BILL KRISTOL:

So it's a modern populist anti-liberalism.

ROBERT KAGAN:

I don't even like to call it populist because that implies that it's mostly just your average person. And populism is always paired versus elitism. But of course, there are elites on both sides of this debate. In what way is Donald Trump not an elite? In what way is Steve Bannon not an elite? Populism also suggests that a lot of it is economic. At least traditionally in American history, populist movements have sought, basically, fundamentally economic goals. And I don't think... I don't think, I'm quite confident that this rebellion, just as in the South before the Civil War and later, this rebellion is not about economics. It's about the definition of what America is.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah. That's so interesting and important because this does make your book, I think, distinct from a lot of the other books, some of which are good books, on this phenomenon. I think a lot of people might argue, "Well, it is a populist reaction. It's not fundamentally thought through. It's not fundamentally grounded as much as you're saying in a kind of tradition or a self-conscious understanding. There's some elites who've glommed onto it but..." I've been struck by this too, though, talking to... the degree to which the conventional view of Trumpism is white working class resentments, ignoring most of the leaders and energizing forces of Trumpism who are not resentful. Maybe they're resentful, but they're not this bottom up 1890s farmers in the Midwest who don't understand the gold standard and think it's bad for them, which it could well have been incidentally, and want leveling economic policies. Right?

ROBERT KAGAN:

Right. And the one thing that... Trump is able to amass a pretty broad coalition precisely because his policies have nothing to do with economics. So he's not threatening, for instance, to take money away from rich people, or even very well-to-do people in general, and give it to a working class movement. He doesn't really offer any economic answer to those in the working class. What he offers to them is revenge. What he offers to them is sympathy and support for what is effectively white anxiety. And whenever you say, "It's the working class that supports Trump." It's the white working class that supports Trump. The non-white working class does not support Trump, overwhelmingly in the other direction.

And so I just think intellectuals in America are heavily influenced by economic and ultimately Marxist interpretations of how society works. And the other thing is, of course people want to blame whatever bad thing is happening on the thing that they're always unhappy about. So people who are unhappy about inequality in America say, "Well, this is because of inequality." People who are unhappy with the Iraq war say, "This is happening because of the Iraq war." So there's a real tendency to do that.

And one of the things, that's why, in a way, that's what I'm trying to do in this book, is to say, "Wait a second, we know what this movement is. We've seen this movement again and again and again throughout history." And that's the part of it that I think people have lost sight of. We're so presentist in our approach to things. We only remember the last 20 years, if that. And we don't realize that the movement we're looking at today has been visible in every generation of Americans since the founding. And that's what I'm trying to get at, because we really have been having this argument from the very beginning, and we're still having it.

BILL KRISTOL:

Let's talk maybe then about the decade that I found most fascinating that you discussed at different times in your book. It also is important in the previous, in the history of American foreign policy book, which is the 1920s. I think some people might say, "Well, yes, there was this argument at the founding but that was a long time ago and the liberals won, sort of." And then there's the Civil War, which was the part they didn't quite win, but that resolved that. And then there's the south, even, in the 1890s. And that's gotten a fair amount of attention, I think, in the last few years, and reminding us how much of a part of American history that is.

But what was most striking to me about your book as a historical matter was the discussion of the 1920s, a decade, I've got to say, that... I don't know. I feel like I've read a fair amount of American history. I know probably less about the 1920s than any decade in the last century. And I suspect that's kind of common. It's in between World War I, and it ends with the Depression, and then there's, of course, the '30s. People know a lot about that. But your account of the 20s was so striking. So talk a little bit about what happened in the 20s. And am I right that it's kind of a nice snapshot of what we're... it's exactly what you're just talking about, that this is something that we should be more familiar with than we are.

ROBERT KAGAN:

Yeah, I've been struck ever since I've studied the 20s at how similar the 1920 election is to the 2016 election. If you had the point to an election where there really was a kind of, again, rebellion against a trend in American politics toward greater liberalism, that election was 1920. And the only difference is we elected some guy, some second rate... or even he almost acknowledged that he was a second rater, Warren Harding, and not this incredible demagogue with this unusual personality that Trump is.

But the thing that's important, and we can go into some detail if you want to, but the thing that's important about the 20s is that it demonstrates that it is not a steady climb upward toward liberalism in America. That was a real step back, toward a more white-centric... in a sense, it was a period of whites trying to reclaim what they were losing. And it had been going-

BILL KRISTOL:

After a large period of big immigration and progressivism being the dominant ideology, in a way in both parties, right?

ROBERT KAGAN:

Right.

BILL KRISTOL:

So it is in that way it's a little like 2016. There were, you might say, modern Republicans and modern Democrats, and there was reaction against both. Trump ran as much against Republicans as against Democrats. And I suppose the same you could say about the 1920s.

ROBERT KAGAN:

Well, there is this, except that in the 1920s, I think that the anti-liberal forces basically won, and they did control the presidency in that period. So first you have this massive wave of immigration and the pressure to shut the door on immigration, which is, by the way, bringing in all kinds of southeastern Europeans and Jews and what have you, which are striking most Americans as very odd and different kind of people. That was

not making them happy. But this is massive influx of immigration from the late 19th century into the early 20th century.

And the pressure to cut that off begins pretty early. Wilson has to fend off numerous efforts by Congress to cut off immigration, but ultimately the success comes in the 1920s. And the 1924 Immigration Act is the most restrictive immigration act in American history. And it very specifically not only focuses on only allowing white people in, but only a certain kind of white people, which, in the 1920s, one of the wonderful features of that period was the widespread popularity of eugenics.

This is something that, I feel like we have swept this completely under the rug. It wasn't just that you had some crazy racists running around. It's that in the university, the leading academics in the young field of anthropology and elsewhere were dividing up the white race into Nordics and Alpines and Mediterranean, and were proving that the Nordic peoples were smarter than the Mediterranean people, et cetera. Sam Huntington, the great Sam Huntington's father was the president of the American Eugenics Society for a while. So this is a time of hyper-consciousness about race and a real desire to limit the American population as much as possible to the original, basically Anglo-Saxon, Protestant that was the majority when the country was founded, to the point where the Ku Klux Klan has... what the people call the Second Ku Klux Klan has got millions of supporters.

It has branched out beyond racism, which was the early Klan, which was basically re-fighting the Civil War. So it isn't... the Ku Klux Klan of the '20s is anti-black, but it's also anti-Catholic and it's also anti-Jewish. And it is not just a southern phenomenon, it's a national phenomenon. And the amazing thing about the Klan in this period is that it's pretty much a respected civic organization in America. Politicians think nothing of going and speaking at Klan rallies. And the Klan claims many, many, any number, a couple of dozens of congressmen who it claims as members.

And so we've completely forgotten about this period, but it's an example of the fact that you can go backwards. It isn't just steady progress. And what undid that triumph of white anti-liberalism were events, not just education, or not even... people didn't change. The Depression discredited the Republican and conservative movement, followed by World War II, which discredited racism, and really led to a huge flowering of liberalism in the wake of what had been a very dominant anti-liberal 1920s.

BILL KRISTOL:

Your discussion of the Klan is so interesting. I just had never focused. I assumed it was still southern, still race-focused as it had been in the 1880s and '90s and all. And it still is somewhat that way, but the degree to which it's strong in the north, strong nationally, as you point out in the book, and you quote people contemporaneously at the time, unselfconsciously, incidentally. Not embarrassed about it. It's sort of like today, you say, "I'm proud to be MAGA." You know?

ROBERT KAGAN:

Right.

BILL KRISTOL:

And they were happy to be in the Klan. And it was a networking thing and so forth. The whole '24 Democratic Convention turns on a refusal, if I'm not mistaken, to repudiate the Klan by one of our two major parties.

ROBERT KAGAN:

Right, right. The Democratic Party could not repudiate the Klan. And so all that's happening, and Americans are capable of living in a society where that kind of prejudice is rampant. And I think that we just think that we grew out of it. And I think this is where we just can't imagine that people are still like that. And I think that to me, that's the big problem that we face intellectually, which is liberals, and I think we are all product of the Enlightenment to some extent, and we have this idea of inevitable progress. And we have this idea that human beings, over time... this is sort of the Frank Fukuyama thesis, which, Frank is hardly alone in feeling this way, that over time people will understand what liberalism requires. They'll become liberal. They'll realize that their prejudices are misplaced, et cetera, et cetera. I think the reality is different.

I think the reality is that very few people really changed their mind that much. And there are always groups that feel the way that people who supported the Klan did, but they're oppressed or repressed or suppressed in various different ways. By Civil War, by... Eisenhower had to send the troops to Little Rock. The south was in full rebellion after Brown v. Board of Education, 1954. Something like 1/5 of Congress signed the Southern Manifesto, almost all of them Democrats at the time.

These forces do not go away, they just are suppressed. And I think what Donald Trump has done has revealed to us, he's shined a light on the fact that millions of Americans still prefer a country in which whites have certain numbers of privileges, and they feel that the country's being taken away from them by non-whites and non-Christians. And the thing is is that they think... people act like this is a special moment, the left has gone too far, progressives have gone too far. But what I found striking striking in writing and researching this history is that the very same comments about how other groups are being preferred over whites and the whites and white Christians in particular are losing ground, you find those same quotations at every stage.

If you go back and read the comments of the Imperial Grand Wizard in the 1920s, he sounds like a MAGA politician now, and he sounds like Donald Trump really talking about how the whites are being mistreated in America today. And that is Donald Trump's number one selling point.

So I think in a certain sense we need to grow up and realize that this is a conflicted society we live in. We like to believe that we're all basically on the same page and we disagree about policies and how to get there, but I think the point is we do not agree on what, "there," is. We do not agree on where we're trying to go, and that is the fight that we're having in the 2024 election, even though it seems like a traditional battle between Democrats and Republicans. I know it doesn't seem that way to you, but it seems that way to a lot of Republicans apparently, and they don't realize that what's up for grabs is actually the nature of our system.

BILL KRISTOL:

I want to get back to this really important point you made quickly about the elites and... Well, I won't get back to it, let's talk about that for a minute then. I do want to come to the contrast with '24 in terms of the party alignment in a certain way because in the 1920s there was sort of elements of this reaction or this anti-liberalism, let's just use that term, in both parties, which both made it stronger in a way, more pervasive but maybe weaker because now it's one party mostly, but it's a party that is half the country. So there's a practical, why don't you talk about this as I just said it, and why don't we talk about, there's a kind of political sciencey difference you might say. I'm not sure which way it cuts honestly in terms of the danger, or the threat, or the power of the anti-liberal forces.

ROBERT KAGAN:

Well, one of the things that requires answering is, well, how did the Republican Party get to be what it is today? And I think the answer to that is fundamentally political/demographic and the sorting of the two parties, which really does begin in this pre-war period when a very large percentage of the immigrants who come into the United States from Europe, from those parts of Europe that people don't want them coming from, are settling in Eastern cities for the most part, and are becoming part of what are then Democratic Party machines.

And the Democratic Party is relatively open to them in a way that the Republican Party is not. And there develops then something which is still present today, which is a kind of suspicion of the city, a belief that the city is teeming with non-Americans.

Now in that period, of course the Democrat Party still has the South, but increasingly under FDR during the Depression, and then especially during World War II, the Democratic Party becomes increasingly a party of minority groups, of ethnic minorities, of Irish and Italians. But also the Republican Party goes through... Basically is in the process of its Southern Strategy and trying basically to get white votes and therefore jettisoning Black votes. So Blacks are moving into Democratic Party in the thirties, and so when you emerge from World War II, you have what is going to become a national resorting.

The Southern anti-liberals gradually break from the Democratic Party. They formed the Dixiecrats in 1948, but then they also ultimately vote for George Wallace. He's sort of the conveyor belt. And then they gradually move into the Republican Party.

And Chris Caldwell, who used to work at *The Review* at *The Weekly Standard*, but he wrote an article in the 1990s complaining about the southern captivity of the Republican Party because it was true. If you looked at the leadership Republican Party in that period, it was largely Southern.

And so whereas as you say, you had once had the anti-liberal forces pretty evenly divided between the two parties, you had Republicans representing sort of white Protestant, upper upper middle class America, traditional Christian Protestant attitudes, and then you had the South, which [inaudible] the Democratic Party.

Over the course of the post-World War II period, all the anti-liberal forces—and the turning point, I think, is probably the Reagan years—all the anti-liberal forces start moving into the Republican Party, leaving the Democratic Party with no anti-liberal essentially, except for the anti-liberals on the left, which we can talk about some other day.

But in terms of this kind of anti-liberalism all in the Republican Party, so that even though this portion of the population is actually shrinking, whites are shrinking as a proportion of the party, obviously white Protestants are shrinking as a proportion of the country, I should say, in the Republican Party they're an increasingly large force to the point where I think that the leadership can't ignore them anymore.

So it's that national sorting, which leads to the strange predicament that we're in right now. It's the fact that all of the anti-liberals in the South and in the North are all in the Republican Party at this point.

BILL KRISTOL:

Whereas FDR could sort of balance the Southerners and the Northern ethnic groups and machines, and then in the Republican Party you could get a Willkie, or a Dewey, or an Eisenhower to beat back the other forces.

What you're saying in a way is that beneath that sort of consensus, what's the difference between Willkie and Roosevelt, or Eisenhower and Stevenson, or Kennedy and Nixon? There's some truth to that I guess, or whatever, but beneath that surface consensus, there's stuff under the surface that we sort of tend to slide over in our normal histories.

ROBERT KAGAN:

Right. And well, we don't slide over it, we just don't take them very seriously. You think back how upset are we about the John Birch Society in retrospect? But President Kennedy ordered a report to say how much of a threat is the John Birch Society? And they concluded that it was a very great threat and I think therefore we tend to under... None of these movements turned into anything. And Goldwater was sort of the last gasp of this kind of conservatism. But they were fairly significant movements in their period. And if you just transpose those movements to today, then you would have what MAGA is. And so I just think, again, we lose sight of the continuity that has existed in all this period.

And Josh Hawley and Marjorie Taylor Greene and other people complain about the "uniparty," which is to say that they don't think there has been a difference between a Republican Party of say John McCain or Mitt Romney or even George W. Bush on the one hand, and the Democrats on the other, people like this have been complaining about the uniparty for decades.

They thought it was a uniparty when Eisenhower was president, Bill Buckley was anti-Eisenhower, he called him a communist. So I think that again, these movements, they don't go away. They come up in different guises and we treat them... Like we think of McCarthyism as being fundamentally anti-communist. But it was this group, again, with Catholics added, interestingly, because they'd been on the outs for so long.

And the other thing that needs to be discussed, and we can talk about this if you want to, is just the shifting attitudes of American ethnic groups so that the movement of Italian Americans, Irish Americans, and other ethnic groups, which had been a key part of the Democratic constituency, who had been enthusiastic about liberalism when it was their ancestors who were trying to climb into the American family, but over time, I think became very confident in their whiteness and basically moved to self-identify with white America rather than with the excluded ethnic groups that they had once been.

Do Irish remember that they used to be in the 19th century depicted as ape-like creatures with a bottle of rum in their hands? Or how Italians were treated in America for many decades, but now they consider themselves white, and so they're willing to tolerate a white nationalist movement in the Republican Party as we see.

BILL KRISTOL:

I want to come back to the elites for a minute. I was struck in reading your account of the twenties, and I myself think this is true today that the elite side of MAGA, let's just say, or Trumpism, is underrated.

The Wall Street Journal editorial page apologists, the importance of that is underrated compared to the *Fox News* screaming and yelling. Both are necessary I suppose, a movement consists of both, almost always. So I was just struck in the book you quote, so you remind us/me that Henry Ford in 1920 published a book *The International Jew: The World's Foremost Problem*. I think that was a pamphlet or a book, I think it was an actual book.

ROBERT KAGAN:

It was a series of pamphlets I think, yeah.

BILL KRISTOL:

Or series of pamphlets, yeah, wonderful.

ROBERT KAGAN:

Yeah.

BILL KRISTOL:

Henry Ford was not a tribute. He was the most famous businessman, one of the 10 most famous businessmen in America. He was the great champion of modern... obviously the automobile and of paying people more so they could buy the automobile.

So I vaguely remember learning about Henry Ford, I mean for two pages in some high school textbook. And he was great because he was like a Democratic capitalism guy. He understood that you needed the working class to have money to buy the products. Wasn't that kind of the thing about Henry Ford? And I think it wasn't false incidentally entirely.

But Ford, it would be sort of as if today, I don't know, one of the heads of the, I don't even know who it would be Facebook or Apple or something, Zuckerberg or whatever, or Steve Jobs were kind of writing books on "The international Jew, The world's foremost problem." But Ford was a huge figure throughout the twenties. It wasn't like he was not respectable, right?

ROBERT KAGAN:

Yeah, no, he was respectable. He ran for office. He was a great peace advocate. He was an isolationist, but I would think he would've said he was an advocate of peace. And he was Henry Ford, he revolutionized the American economy. No, he was a big figure.

And I think it's important, he was on the extreme end of antisemitism, I would say, but he was not so extreme that he was read out of society by any stretch of the imagination. I think that just goes back to thinking that, I don't know whether people forget it or not, is how prevalent antisemitism and how accepted antisemitism was in the first half of the 20th century.

I was reading recently again, rereading, Edith Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, which is a wonderful book and has so many wonderful qualities about it. The antisemitism in it is mind-boggling. It is as pure as it can be that the characterization of Jews in that book is just horrific. And that was routine. I think in most works of literature in that period you see very casual antisemitism.

The interesting thing about that is that that was an increase in antisemitism following the great immigration influx of the 1890s. Antisemitism was not a big part of 19th century America, but it became a big part of 20th century America as, again, the white Anglo-Saxon Protestant, still majority in America at that time was getting very nervous about what it meant to be an American, and really set out to define more clearly what it meant to be an American. And that led to the exclusion of Jews in a way that they had not been previously excluded.

And it led to all this sort of hierarchy of races, et cetera. This was not something that they had inherited. It was something that was introduced in that period. Again, just to emphasize, it's not impossible for it to be reintroduced in a country that had seemingly moved beyond it. When you have whites in this sort of state of panic that I think many whites are in today.

BILL KRISTOL:

Well that's such an important point to kind of, I don't know what you call it, zigzag. I mean it's not in a straight line, it's not even, this is the more moderate version of the triumphal liberalism thesis that it is not a straight line, we're grown-ups, we know that there can be setbacks and reverses and reactions, but ultimately, ultimately history goes in this direction.

But it was a close-run thing that it ended up going in the direction it did with FDR and with World War II and not going in the Henry Ford America first direction, isn't that right, either in domestic or foreign policy?

ROBERT KAGAN:

Look, I mean the founders set up... the Declaration is an important document in American history and sets up a set of ideals that Americans are allegedly supposed to try to approximate, as Lincoln said, ever deepening ever broadening the principles in our society. And so I think there is a certain amount of constant pressure in America toward liberalism because of the Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights and to the degree to which the Constitution enshrined that.

But other than that, whether liberalism is riding high at any given moment is almost entirely dependent on circumstances. And the Depression was a circumstance. World War II was a circumstance. Neither of those events were necessarily inevitable, and they really did lead to the huge burst of liberalism that was the second half of the 20th century. And it precisely is what has set off this movement that we're seeing in MAGA today.

They are reacting in a sense to 60, 70 years of liberal triumph and liberal dominance. Now they think that they're responding to an excess of liberalism, but in fact they're just responding to the founders' principles playing themselves out increasingly over time.

And, again, that's a fundamental, I think, misunderstanding that many conservatives have. They think that the courts were being creative and creating new rights, et cetera, when what the court was doing was recognizing areas of discrimination in ways and with groups that people hadn't thought of before, but which nevertheless were being discriminated against, whether it was women, or gays, or obviously Blacks, people knew, were being discriminated against.

But as these rights have been discovered and acknowledged increasingly those forces of traditionalism in our country have increasingly felt hemmed in and oppressed. And you can read, then you can feel it in reading someone like Deneen who talks about liberal totalitarianism, et cetera. But there is a great feeling that these people feel oppressed by liberalism. And they're right, they are being oppressed by liberalism. But it's the founders' liberalism, not some creation of crazy progressivism of the late-twentieth century.

BILL KRISTOL:

And I suppose one corollary of this sort of, let's not be progressive, I can use that term in our understanding of history, let's not have a kind of wiggish understanding of history, I guess is what it used to be called, this kind of nice inevitable movement forward in a liberal direction with occasional hiccups, is that these other periods have real world effects. That's a point people don't quite... When I think of the twenties, well, there was this kind of immigration act that was unfortunate because it reflected a kind of real racism and obviously and prejudice and stupid eugenic theories as you're saying. But it also really changed our immigration policy for decades. It wasn't really changed

until the sixties, and it reduced the number of immigrants in the U.S. radically in terms of the percentage coming in.

And incidentally you mentioned the anti-Semitism thing, made me think of it. We didn't let Jews... I mean think of that, everyone knew what was happening in Germany by '37, '38 certainly after Kristallnacht, right?

ROBERT KAGAN:

Right.

BILL KRISTOL:

And we were so wedded threat to our nativist restrictionism in immigration we wouldn't let Jews in from Germany or certainly from Europe. Argentina let, my sense is, people in more easily, or Cuba, all kinds of places like that, not paragons of liberalism one might not have said.

So I think the real world effects of some of these things is also somehow a little bit washed over, or glossed over in some of the histories.

ROBERT KAGAN:

Right, and then the 1965 immigration reform, which then permitted not only much more immigration, but a wave of non-white immigration that was also unprecedented in American history. You had huge influx of Asians, people from Latin America, and other non-European sources of immigration, which also further changed the complexion of the country, but which has led obviously to the same kind of backlash that we saw in the 1920s, which was a reaction to the previous immigration flow. And now we are seeing this reaction to the immigration flow that began in 1965.

The interesting thing is that, and as I try to argue in the book, the problem for the anti-liberals and the white nationalists and the white Christian nationalists is that they closed the door way too late. So many tens of millions of immigrants had come into the country and totally changed the complexion and changed the political balance in the country.

And that has happened again because of the reforms of 1965 to the point where, and this is my one sort of optimistic note at the end, is that that is going to play a role in our political system. And obviously we're not many years away from being a majority-minority country. This sort of white anxiety is going to be intense, but they are a shrinking portion of the population. They're going to be a shrinking portion even of the Republican Party, unless the Republican Party itself shrinks. And so I just don't know how they can manage to hold on to this too much longer given the way the demographics are shifting.

BILL KRISTOL:

This was the argument against you to kind go, to use your argument against this mild moment of optimism, sudden unusual moment of mild optimism here, it would be to say, "Well, but anti-liberalism can also appeal to elements of these minorities," as you just said, the Italians, the Irish, the Catholics. I don't know, other people can say, "I'm here, but I don't want this America with these other people," or, "I don't want these different customs of these other people."

So the anti-liberalism can find new recruits maybe, that would be the kind of modification of your argument, I suppose.

ROBERT KAGAN:

No, that's certainly true, and I don't want to get too optimistic about anything.

BILL KRISTOL:

I just want to put you back to earth here.

ROBERT KAGAN:

No, no. But this gets to the important point, and again, you don't know how it's going to play out. It is pretty clear. This is something that, again, this gets back to the major point which Jefferson warned about, which Lincoln was talking about in his Lyceum speech in 1838, which is that it is possible for Americans to lose their sense of the critical importance of the founding principles.

BILL KRISTOL:

Right.

ROBERT KAGAN:

Lincoln was worried that people had it during the revolution, but lost it afterwards. Jefferson was worried that they would in fact lose it after the revolution was over. And I think we are in that situation, and a lot of it is because people just get complacent. You know? The fervor for rights, the fervor for the declaration comes from people who need it in order to equalize their position in America. So those who feel excluded, those who feel disdain, those who are in fact limited in their ability to enjoy the full freedoms of the United States, are always going to be the ones who are most committed to the principles of liberalism and the principles of the founding. And as they get comfortable in society and no longer feel that their rights are in any way endangered, then they start looking for other things and they don't care as much about that.

I think that there is an element of that. Obviously, as you say, that's what happened to Irish Americans and Italian Americans and other of those kinds of ethnic groups. To some extent, it's now happening among a certain number of minority groups who have hitherto been discriminated against, and now, almost by definition, they must feel comfortable enough that they don't feel the need for liberalism to protect them anymore. So they now have the luxury, I suppose, of voting for Donald Trump on whatever other grounds, and could be, as you say, they got over the bridge and now let's pull up the bridge because they don't want anybody else coming in. And that's a real problem.

Again, a lot of it will depend on how much even political leaders are willing to defend liberalism. And I think that there's no question that liberalism has been attacked from both sides, from left and from right, and the constituency for liberalism in America, this sort of passionate constituency for liberalism in America. Again, I want to emphasize I'm talking about the founders' liberalism, seems to be severely diminished on numerous fronts, and I don't know whether we can recapture it. I don't want World War II, but it was World War II in a way that reinvigorated ... It was a liberal war, and it therefore reinvigorated liberalism.

BILL KRISTOL:

And I suppose these groups don't have to have a fervor necessarily for anti-liberalism. I mean, in a way, one point you make is, anti-liberalism in a way is a default position or can become a default position.

ROBERT KAGAN:

Yeah.

BILL KRISTOL:

If people aren't reminded of the importance of liberalism, of liberal principles, you could just slide into sort of normal transactional ethnic group politics in theory, which God knows we've had that in many, many centuries and many epochs in many nations. And it needn't lead to, as I say, to crazed hostility to this group, or that it can just lead to bargaining, but a kind of lack of any principle. But it does slide into hostility because, of course, when there's no principle to constrain you, the bargaining gets more and more.

ROBERT KAGAN:

Right, right.

BILL KRISTOL:

It doesn't stay at a level of polite, just kind of slight preferences and economic policy for one region over another, but it slides into a more anti-liberal default, I suppose.

ROBERT KAGAN:

I mean, just to really underline that point, liberalism I think is probably more antithetical to human nature than non-liberalism because it really does require a certain selflessness. I remember when, I don't know whether Frank was just quoting Hegel or what, but there's this argument that human beings crave recognition. And I think that that is true, but they crave recognition for themselves. They crave recognition for themselves and their family members and their tribe and maybe their religious group. They don't crave recognition for other people who they disagree with, who look different from them, talk differently from them, have different religious views from them. To insist on everybody's recognition is... There are very few examples of it occurring in human history. I mean, this is the thing, this is what people underestimate for all kinds of reasons, the revolutionary nature, the truly revolutionary nature of the American experiment, which is a commitment to universal rights.

The English were not committed to universal rights. The French talked about being committed to universal rights, but they definitely turned out not to be. So this is the one place where this has been attempted, and I think we have enjoyed a lot of luxury. We've been a very prosperous country, we've been a country at peace. So if ever there was a place where you could have this kind of liberalism work, I think it's fair to say that the United States would be a prime contender for it. But even in the United States, it's a difficult thing to pull off. And I think that we've gotten too complacent that liberalism is just the norm in the United States and that it's here to stay. I'm hopeful that we will continue to be a liberal country, but I do think people are not taking seriously enough the risk that we're facing right now to the founders' liberalism.

BILL KRISTOL:

One aspect of being a liberal country is, Lincoln stresses in the last of his speeches, respect for the rule of law, no mob rule and all that. I do think, I mean your discussion of the '20s, you discuss how much the Klan, for example, there's a kind of political side of it working through elected officials and so forth, and then a kind of extra-legal bludgeoning of people and militia side of it, or whatever you want to call it, I guess vigilante side of it, sort of working in tandem. And that's again often discussed as a

tiny, weird footnote in American history, but obviously in the south, it was much more than a footnote, and even in certain aspects beyond the south. I feel like that's an aspect of today's authoritarian movement or anti-liberal movement. That comes back in a big way, right?

ROBERT KAGAN:

Yeah.

BILL KRISTOL:

All these guardrails against, well, you can't really do that, that would be acting outside the law. You can't just trash the courts even when they're not giving you a decision. There has to be a certain modicum basis of respect. If we don't have the rules of the game, then there are no guardrails. That's eroded so much faster in the last 10 years than I guess I would've expected.

ROBERT KAGAN:

Yeah. Yeah. And again, it is to some extent reverting to norm in America, as you were alluding to. Even during periods of liberal ascendancy from the 1940s and '50s, there were still lynchings going on in the south and there was a degree of tolerated racial violence in the United States for most of our history. We take for granted that we now have a federal government, which has been acutely sensitive to the violations of liberties including in the South. Again, Eisenhower sent the 101st Airborne to Little Rock in order to enforce desegregation rules. And there has been... That kind of rebellion has just... The idea that a significant portion of the country would fundamentally be opposed even to the general direction that the country was moving in, and I just think that we just have lost sight of how prevalent that is.

Again, a lot depends on the leader, and this is where Donald Trump I think is important. There were certainly other anti-liberal candidates available. I mean, I think that we could name any number of, before Trump, any number of people who were on the anti-liberal side, but Trump is the one who has been able to capture this force because I think of his own peculiar personality. But the notion... This guy introduced himself... People, again, I think forget, he introduced himself to the American public as a presidential candidate in 2011 as a white supremacist. His first and really only issue in 2011 was the birther conspiracy.

And when he comes out on the birther conspiracy, everybody knows what that means, especially the white nationalists in the country. So he summoned them to him immediately, and then he displayed all the characteristics that such demagogues have always displayed, including his crudeness and... He is a violator of all the norms, and it is precisely because of his violation of all the norms that he has this following because they see him as the one person who really is willing to defy the sort of liberal hegemony that has grown up in America, that he has the strength, the determination, he doesn't care what all these guys think about him, and he will fight this fight. But what is the fight? The fight is against American liberalism writ large.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, that's good. I mean, the use of extra-legal forces and threats and even some terror, that's not... I mean, these are not the historians I've read much of, but I think labor historians would say that that's happened quite a lot on the management side in the late 19th century, and it wasn't a trivial part of the attempt to keep unions and working men under control. And then as God knows, there's a lot of ethnic violence and

so forth. I mean, this is a staple of the American fiction, I like to read the mystery of old crime novels and stuff, cops are not neutral players among all the citizens in small town America or in big city America. Right?

ROBERT KAGAN:

Right.

BILL KRISTOL:

Many famous books and novel and movies have been based on this. It is interesting, I don't know, these books and movies are very popular, and everyone sort of reads them and likes them I guess, but you don't really think, well, that's really kind of about America, this small-town violence.

ROBERT KAGAN:

Yeah. The point I was trying to get to, which I didn't quite get to, which is that it doesn't require much change at the federal level to open up the opportunity to go back to what was a very common quality in America, which was the sort of the tolerated violence against certain groups.

BILL KRISTOL:

At the state and local level, often you could pretend it wasn't a national issue almost, right? We can't really control what happens. Yeah.

ROBERT KAGAN:

Well, and that was the view, don't tell the south what to do. They have to deal with their world, their way, et cetera, et cetera. That's what Buckley was arguing in the '50s and '60s. But we've had a federal government that has seen it as its job, if some cop shoots a Black person, to see whether that requires some kind of trial, and cops have been tried and convicted. That doesn't have to happen. That requires a real determination to make it happen. Throughout most of American history, cops like that were never punished. They were applauded in some cases. It doesn't take... Again, people are like, the jack boots don't need to be marching down the street for America to change very fundamentally from where it is right now.

The fact that there are certain minority groups that don't seem to be conscious of the fact that it's definitely going to be turned on them. As I watch the protesters, and I don't even want to get into the justice or lack of justice of their protests, but the fact that people who are sympathetic to Muslims would think that Biden is worse than Donald Trump when we know what Donald Trump is going to do as far as American Muslims are concerned. He's made it very clear. I really don't understand. Too many people do not seem to understand that if Trump wins, there was going to be a bigger target on their backs than they are used to in this America.

BILL KRISTOL:

And from official forces, maybe either federal or tolerated forces at the state and local level with sympathetic governors or mayors obviously, but also the vigilante forces. I mean, you mentioned people not being punished. That's a part of American history obviously, and the kind of collusion you might say of the vigilantes and the law enforcement and official forces.

ROBERT KAGAN:

Absolutely.

BILL KRISTOL:

I'm very struck with people have not made enough. I think Amanda Carpenter, who used to be with us at *The Bulwark* and is now at Protect Democracy, has made this point. Trump says in every speech that he's against qualified immunity for police officers, which I think a lot of people think actually is too much immunity, honestly, in terms of holding them accountable, but whatever. And he's for absolute immunity as he is for himself as president, for police officers, basically. They're not going to be charged with anything. He also says he's going to use the pardon power for the January 6th insurrectionists, but presumably many, many others as well.

You combine total immunity for what you're doing if you're a law enforcement official, and we have hundreds of thousands in this country, and they're not all organized in terribly well-regulated police departments. They're in sheriff's offices and all kinds of things. And then you combine that with the pardon power, that's pretty far down the road, isn't it, away from liberalism? I mean, it's sort of like the definition of not being liberal, is cops can do whatever they want at the beck of the powers that be and vigilantes can do whatever they want at the beck of the powers that be, or some powers that want to be. It doesn't even have to be the powers that are quite in power yet.

ROBERT KAGAN:

Right. Trump is going to play on the fact that even in the center of American politics, people are anxious about crime, although I think the statistics don't bear it out, but nevertheless, it's clear that if you're a Democrat in a city these days, you have to be tough on crime. So when Trump comes in and wants to be tough on crime, he is hardly going to be swimming against the tide. And if you think about where he first wants to militarize our society, which he talks about a lot, and this is something that I think we learned from his first term, if you've read Miles Taylor or listened to him talk and others from the administration, is that the one thing that Trump discovered, as all presidents do, is that the one thing that he can do is order the military around 'cause he is commander-in-chief.

So he talks about using the military to carry out deportations and man immigrant holding centers. And a majority of Americans are going to be probably fine with that, but the problem is, it's more than the camel's nose inside the tent when you start using the military for domestic purposes that it was not intended to be used for. He can use the Homeland Security as a domestic military force as well, but as long as he's doing these things on issues where there is, not just Republican and MAGA support, but sort of broader support on the general issue. Jamie Dimon said Trump was right about immigration. So that's the other scary thing, is that he can start sort of abusing his powers in a way that a lot of Americans will find acceptable.

BILL KRISTOL:

I think that Jamie Dimon comment, he's the head of, what is it? The head of Citibank?

ROBERT KAGAN:

JPMorgan Chase.

BILL KRISTOL:

JPMorgan. I can't keep any of these. Chase, all those oligarchic corporate institutions, they're all a blur to me. It's one thing for them to say, "We like the economic policies."

Okay, we understand that rich guys like economic policy that help the rich, and they have arguments for why it's good ultimately and blah, blah, blah, and corporate America and all this. The fact that he's mentioned immigration is very striking. Jamie Dimon, what is his problem with more immigration? I mean, I don't believe there's any way in which, as a corporate matter, they are hurt by having higher immigration. There are some businesses I guess that would benefit from restrictionist immigration policies. I don't quite know why, but there would be some, I suppose. I haven't really thought that through.

But banks don't care, and probably hire a lot of people who are pretty recent immigrants for some of their jobs and so forth. Of course, it's a global company and it's not nativist in that simple-minded sense of we want to protect America. They like having branches overseas and dealing with having massive international agreements about obviously banking and credit and so forth. It is very striking therefore, for me that he, not based on any personal, it's not Henry Ford on personal bigotry, I don't believe, just thinks, "Yeah, he's probably right about immigration." Why does he think... That is revealing, right? It shows in a way how easy it is to slide from the issues you kind of, makes a certain amount of sense just from a self-interest point of view that you're with the authoritarians on to the issues that they stress, that you're not really with the mind, you haven't thought about much, but I guess maybe there's something there and suddenly you're justifying the anti-immigration stuff. And what's next, right? I mean, I feel like that was a big moment that got sort of slid over. I don't know.

ROBERT KAGAN:

Yeah. I don't really know whether people didn't really believe that Jamie Dimon really meant any of the things that he said. I don't know. But the bottom line is, I didn't even take the substance of it very seriously, I read that as Jamie Dimon signaling to Donald Trump that "You're not going to have any problem from me and my kind," which I think Donald Trump knows, which does get to this larger point, which is okay, I don't have any doubt that the American corporate world will be fine with Donald Trump as long as they bring him the necessary gifts or cut the deals with his family that he wants them to cut. I mean, they're going to be okay.

Capitalism and authoritarianism may be incompatible ultimately, but capitalists and authoritarianism are not incompatible. As we've seen, there were rich people in China too, you know? But when you get beyond Jamie Dimon and start asking this question about what we used to call the normie Republicans, they also, in my view, I feel like this is where Lincoln and Jefferson's warnings come into play. I think they also think they'll be fine. I no longer believe ... This was a turning point for me, I don't know whether you've gone through this as well. I spent a lot of time, most of the past couple years, thinking people just don't get it. They don't really see what a threat Trump is. They're not seeing it clearly. I no longer believe that. I think everybody sees what Trump is. It's too obvious to miss. And so if you're still voting for him, that means either you like what he's talking about or you don't care. You like that he's going to be a dictator. And he himself has said quite correctly that a lot of his followers are delighted at the prospect of him being a dictator. I think that's true.

But what about everybody else? They're okay with it. They're willing to vote for someone who they know could be a dictator. I mean, Bill Barr was the best example of this recently, but he's a professional Republican and those people are just cowards. I mean, people like that are just being cowards. But your average Republican voter, who I think is probably a white... Even a white suburban male in particular does not feel that he's going to really lose out in this other system, whatever it's going to be.

BILL KRISTOL:

I mean, the counterargument would be that they think, he thinks, maybe incorrectly, that the guardrails will still kind of hold, sort of like the first term and that it won't change America as much as you're saying it would.

ROBERT KAGAN:

No, I get that. And I've never claimed that I'm 100% certain that Trump is going to introduce a dictatorship, but I think any honest person would say the risk is high. Even if there's a 20% chance that Trump will do all the things he says he's going to do, isn't that too much of a risk to take? And then they have to convince themselves or convince us, or whoever's listening that somehow Biden is a bigger threat to the republic than Trump. I don't believe any normal person, any reasonable person could come to that conclusion. And so you have to ask, how sincere is that belief and how much is it that they're just cool with Trump? I just think we have to face that possibility.

BILL KRISTOL:

I mean, the in-between stage, and I guess students of the psychology of authoritarianism and stuff and authoritarian movements have really studied this a lot, is a kind of wishful thinking where you don't quite have to... I mean, you're saying they have to face it. They don't quite have to face it because people can deceive themselves about a lot of things, and so they should. But yeah, they can tell themselves guardrails will hold a little more than you... It's not just 20, 80%, maybe it's 95% and Biden's worse than you say. And the combination of those things lets me go down this path.

But I agree, it's required much, much more. This is what's most striking for me over the last three years, I think, is what you're saying. It's required so much more willful blindness than it did in 2016 or '17. God knows we were anti-Trump in 2016. You were extremely outspoken and vocal and analyzed it, but you could talk yourself into things then that you really shouldn't be able to now. But people literally, as many people are talking themselves into it now. I mean, just empirically, as many people are supporting Trump now as supported him in 2016 or 2020. So that's kind of striking, right? Because he's much more radical in his statements, much more frank—

ROBERT KAGAN:

Absolutely.

BILL KRISTOL:

...than he was. And the movement is so much more radical than it was. There was no Heritage Project 2025 in 2016, or even in 2020, really.

ROBERT KAGAN:

Right, right. And with the way people talk about his first term, the way Jamie Dimon talked about his first term, he was good on the economy and he wasn't totally wrong about NATO, and he was maybe sort of right about immigration. And every time we talk about his first term, we don't mention what happened at the end of his first term.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, it is silly.

ROBERT KAGAN:

It's as if he did not try to become a dictator in 2020, which by the way, people don't put that clearly enough either. If he had succeeded, if Mike Pence had not shown unaccustomed backbone at that one particular moment and Trump had succeeded, he would've been ruling as a dictator. He would've basically succeeded in annulling a fair election and held onto power and would've been ruling illegally. So he was perfectly willing to go down that road, and he's made it very clear that he is perfectly willing to go down that road again. I don't know what people need to hear to make a judgment about these things. You hang around with all kinds of people I don't hang around with. What is the common answer to that point?

BILL KRISTOL:

If the guardrails held on January 6th. I mean, it would have cost—

ROBERT KAGAN:

So we're electing a... I mean, it's stupid of you and me to have an argument about this as a proxy for other people. But so what you're saying is, yes, he may well try to become a dictator again, and I'm going to vote for him because somebody else is going to stop him from being a dictator, not me.

BILL KRISTOL:

But that's literally what Bill Barr is saying.

ROBERT KAGAN:

Not me.

BILL KRISTOL:

Right. I mean, the next Bill Barr will say, and again, what he's made very clear that he's not going to put the Mike, whatever you think of them, the Mike Pences and the Bill Barrs in charge again. This has been so interesting. Final point, though. You're a foreign policy historian and scholar and practitioner student. I am struck as we've been thinking about this, I'm thinking about this here. It can't be an accident that America First comes out of this moment in the '20s and '30s that you've been describing, and that the modern America First, the term that Trump actually revived, and I remember when he did it, I thought, "You can't revive that term. It's so discredited," and I was totally wrong.

It's now totally part of the discourse. It's the America First wing of the Republican Party, which is Trump's wing, and you can be anti-Ukraine and pro-Putin and so forth. I mean, talk a little bit about the connection, if I'm right about that there is really a connection, and I guess how central it feels to me it is. I don't think it's just a sidebar. Oh, these guys happen to be kind of isolationists as well, or these guys now for some bizarre reason don't like Zelensk3x1`y and sort of like Putin. I feel like that's a pretty important part of this anti-liberalism you're discussing.

ROBERT KAGAN:

I believe that the America First wing of the party, the sort of Marjorie Taylor Greens and the Josh Hawleys, et cetera, are not interested in foreign policy at all. This is all about the war on liberalism, and their view of international relations is seen through the lens of the war on liberalism. And that is also true of the America First movement. And by the way, it's been true throughout American history. It has always been the case that

Americans' views of foreign policy are primarily shaped by their views of domestic political battles.

I mean, going back to Hamilton and Jefferson, I mean, their disagreement about foreign policy, which is like, do you support the British or do you support the French, the revolution, et cetera, was almost entirely determined by their fight that they were having about domestic politics. And in the South, in the 19th century, the realists in the South that the first sort of... People say things in the South which sound realist, is the Southern view that we don't want to be promoting liberalism overseas when people were getting exercised about Greek liberation from Turkey or the Hungarian Revolution, et cetera. And the South was always saying, "That's none of our business. Let's not get into it." So anti-liberalism—

BILL KRISTOL:

And if we're going to take in new states, they should be slave states. The degree to which you make this point in your book, in *Dangerous Nation*, I mean, how much slavery drives all these—

ROBERT KAGAN:

Everything. Right.

BILL KRISTOL:

...quote, "foreign policy debates" in the early, prior to the 19th century, first half of the 19th century.

ROBERT KAGAN:

Right. And now if I were writing that book again, I would've added, because of my understanding of what I learned later, that, yes, they were defending the institution of slavery, and they felt that if the North could run foreign policy in a pro-liberal direction, it could also go after slavery, which was true. A lot of people in the North did feel that way, but they were also anti-liberal. I mean, they were officially anti-liberal. They said the Declaration of Independence was a mistake. It didn't need to be there. John Calhoun, he says we shouldn't have had a Declaration of Independence. And there's no question that in the 1920s and '30s, anti-liberalism was the driving force of isolationism. I mean, yes, we don't want to get into another war, but when you're in this period, especially in the 1930s, it's impossible to separate the two.

And so if you fast-forward to our present situation, it's clear to me that just as at the time, the America Firsters referred to World War II as the New Dealers' war and did throughout the war, by the way, so Hawley and company see Ukraine as the liberals' war. It's not a war for American interests. It's a war for spreading liberalism. There's this whole theory out there that America is an evil liberal empire. That is, people like Yoram Hazony have made that argument. That's certainly what Steve Bannon says. It's what Patrick Deneen would say. And they're really opposed to America's support for liberalism overseas. And that is a big motivating factor.

And I even think that the reason that they are so hawkish on China and so dovish on Europe is that China's a communist country or run by the Communist Party, and they want to insist that America is also being run by communists. Joe Biden is a communist. The Democratic Party is communist, and so they are more interested in making that linkage. I don't even know whether they would defend Taiwan, whether Trump would defend Taiwan if the Chinese attacked it. I have no reason to think that we would under

Trump, but so therefore, the purpose of all this foreign policy approach is about fighting the domestic battle, finding domestic enemies.

It's a pretty solid tradition that goes back to the 1930s which has been resurrected. And by the way, just as a final point, much to my amazement, there are significant figures in Trump world, like this guy, Russell Vought, who I don't really know who he is, but I guess he was head of OMB under Trump, and he's constantly being spoken of as a potential chief of staff in a second Trump term. He says explicitly, "We want to go back to the 1920s." They're not pulling any punches on that front. They want to go back to 1920s with the troika of isolationism, protectionism and anti-immigration, hostility to immigration. So the lines are clear, much more than I would've even ever expected between the straight line from America First to the 1930, really, 1942, to where we are today.

BILL KRISTOL:

Just one footnote on China. Yeah, that's very interesting that they are tied together by anti-liberalism to bring us full circle. I mean, in China, I just feel, I don't think they would actually fight for Taiwan. B, China was always an object of American nativism, back to the original restrictionist immigration legislation, obviously, and with the 1880s, I think, Chinese Exclusion Act.

ROBERT KAGAN:

Yeah, that too. Yeah.

BILL KRISTOL:

And it is communist sort of, so they can sort of pretend to be anti-communist easier than being anti-Putin, I guess. But I think it's also, don't you think, just, Americans have... There's enough embedded now since World War II that we should be opposed to someone out there in the world, some bad guys, that they can't just be what I suspect they would be if they really were candid, which is they don't care about any of this stuff abroad. They want absolutely to defend us. They kind of like the actual authoritarian governments. They certainly like Hungary because that's totally explicit, Putin, slightly more guarded, but not much more guarded. Bolsonaro and all these characters, I feel like we're one step... If one of them had the nerve, honestly, to say, "You know that China stuff, that's kind of stupid too, honestly, that's left over from neocons and from liberal human rights types and stuff," and they're fine too. I mean, I feel like that would be the next step for those people, right?

ROBERT KAGAN:

Well, two data points on that. One was that, remember Ron DeSantis said, "Well, I don't want to fight a proxy war with China either," right? He did go all the way. He said, "I don't want to fight a proxy war with Russia and Ukraine, and I also don't want to fight a proxy war with China." So I always thought that was the place to go, but then I can never pronounce this guy's name, Sohrab Ahmani, what is his name?

BILL KRISTOL:

Sohrab Ahmari, yeah.

ROBERT KAGAN:

Yeah, yeah, has written a lonely piece saying, "Why are we so opposed to China? Don't they have the kind of moral system that we would like to have in the United States?"

You know what I mean? You could say China is communist, but in many respects, China is also just a traditional authoritarian regime that is also suppressing what a lot of people in America right would call excessive liberalism, et cetera. I agree with you. Other than the utility of the fact that there's a communist party in charge, I don't know why they should be opposed to China any more than they're opposed to Russia.

BILL KRISTOL:

I think Bolton says that Trump said to Xi in private, "That's good what you're doing with the Uyghurs. I mean, why should you have these problematic Muslim characters causing trouble for you in part of your empire or your nation?" Final thoughts, anti-liberalism. I'm curious, the book's been out, which we're speaking on just, what is it, Tuesday, May 7th? I mean, you've been talking about the book for about a week.

ROBERT KAGAN:

A week.

BILL KRISTOL:

Anything surprising in the reaction? People more hostile, less hostile, more open? I don't know, surprised, not surprised?

ROBERT KAGAN:

Well, I think I've been on pretty friendly media so far, so it's hard to... If you're on MSNBC a lot, I'm not going to get attacked from where I think... I had an interesting conversation with Jonah Goldberg on his podcast. I'm expecting that, well, people may just ignore it, but if they don't ignore it, I expect conservatives to sort of push back on my pretty negative treatment of modern conservatism. And that's something we didn't really get into, but even people who are anti-Trump are sort of like, "Why are you saying that about Bill Buckley? Why are you condemning originalism," which I say is an anti-liberal doctrine almost inherently. So there may be some of that coming up.

BILL KRISTOL:

But people are open to this notion that, they're open to getting out of the progressive mindset that liberalism is still on the right side of history kind of thing. The arc of, what is it, the arc of history bends towards justice or liberalism or something?

ROBERT KAGAN:

Right. I don't know. The problem is, even for Democrats, of course, it's very easy for them to fall into the yeah, well, this has been... It's just like Ronald Reagan. Trump is just like Reagan. There are a lot of Democrats who are like, "Yeah, this is just Reagan, more Reagan," and they don't understand, or even W. The amazing thing is that Democrats don't understand that actually George W. Bush is very much a liberal in the classic sense. His policies were very liberal. He was unbelievably pro-immigration. He did things today, which would have him driven out of the Republican Party, and Reagan I think was a complicated character. FDR was his, not childhood hero, but his hero as a young man, and he was a Truman Democrat.

So I think he was what I would call a liberal conservative as opposed to an anti-liberal conservative. And so the inability to distinguish, I think, has been, I don't know if it's been damaging, but certainly it's led to an intellectual failure to see what's different. And not just about Donald Trump, but by the movement that Donald Trump represents. That movement did not control the Reagan administration. They were basically fed

crumbs from the table during the Reagan years and ended the Reagan years very disillusioned by the Republican Party. Pat Buchanan leaves the party in '92, right?

BILL KRISTOL:

Well, later in the '90s. He runs the nomination twice, but he runs against the Republican establishment. Absolutely.

ROBERT KAGAN:

But he runs against Republican establishment, and so the idea of the uniparty really is prevalent in the Reagan years, and it's just unfortunate. Americans are so, again, present-ist. They just don't see the patterns and they really can't tell the difference between your normal Republican-Democratic race and what's happening this year. I would say that's certainly true of Republicans, but it's also true, unfortunately, of many Democrats.

BILL KRISTOL:

Well, hopefully they'll all read your book and then we'll be in a better situation.

ROBERT KAGAN:

I'm sure it'll change everything.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, that too is a liberal myth about enlightenment, but that's a longer conversation, right? Part of the point of your book is that you can't expect too much enlightenment suddenly, right?

ROBERT KAGAN:

Yeah.

BILL KRISTOL:

Anti-liberalism is a strong force in history and a strong force in human psychology, I guess is what you're saying. And the founders saw that, right? They set up all these institutions and they were very worried about their survival because they saw how strong, you stress this point, how strong anti-liberalism was and would remain. It wouldn't go away after one or two generations of checks and balances working or whatever.

ROBERT KAGAN:

I mean, whether Ben Franklin actually said "A republic, if you can keep it," I mean, that certainly was the sentiment, which meant that he knew perfectly well and they knew perfectly well that for one thing, this is a voluntary system. At the end of the day, it's a voluntary system. It's a voluntary system for individuals. It's a voluntary system for the states. Even though states are not supposed to leave the federal government, let's face it, this government was formed by states agreeing to come together. Then they can decide that they don't want to be part of it, and that's another thing we didn't get into, but what happens if Trump loses in the election? But we can probably talk about that another... We should live as long, as they say.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yes, we can talk about that, the new secessionism and so forth in our next conversation.

ROBERT KAGAN:

Right.

BILL KRISTOL:

Bob, thanks for joining me today. It's really been terrific.

ROBERT KAGAN:

My pleasure. Thanks a lot. I enjoyed the conversation.

BILL KRISTOL:

Great, and thank you all for joining us on *Conversations*.