

CONVERSATIONS

WITH BILL KRISTOL

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BILL KRISTOL:

Hi, I am Bill Kristol. Welcome back to *Conversations*. I'm very pleased to be joined again by James Carville, with whom I had a discussion, what, five weeks ago, which stands up quite well. Quite well. You were pretty bullish on Harris's chances and on the convention. Then after the convention, I guess it slipped back to maybe an even race. Last night was the debate. We're speaking here on, what is it, September 11th? Where do we stand? What do you think?

JAMES CARVILLE:

Well, *Fox* ran a story the night before the debate. I did Dan Abrams' show and I said, "look, I'll be honest with you, I think Trump's walking into a trap." I knew who was in the prep room and they were the right people and I thought that she would do very well. I thought he would be typically undisciplined and he was. I mean Laura Loomer. Yeah, I think it went very well. I was texting people last night and as you have been around Democratic culture a little bit more, there's a great deal of negativity. It's smart if you say something's wrong and I had a friend of mine who's actually very smart and this person texted me, I wish he'd talked more about the middle class and I said, did you see the first seven minutes of the debate? I mean, she was laying out child tax credits and everything that you could. I think this person was just being, felt like they had to be nitpicky. The stuff that I would get via text last night was very nitpicky too.

BILL KRISTOL:

She was getting under his skin, which she obviously did and which really is driving a lot of the coverage, at least as of now, the next day of the debate and it was very noticeable at the time. I mean, people now talk about it as if, well of course she got under his skin, but I don't think that's easy to do. It wasn't so obvious that was going to work, at least to me. I thought she did it very skillfully, don't you think?

JAMES CARVILLE:

I did and I thought the biggest challenge she had was people don't know her. I think they found out a little bit more about her last night and there were 28%. I saw one poll, I hate to quote one poll, but I remember in the back of my mind it was a deep, pretty good one, said 28% were open for more information about her. 9% were open for more information about him. That last night couldn't be anything but good, in that sense. You usually try to play these events down. Well, it's pretty good. 63 to 37 said she won the debate. Somebody told me, a reliable person, I've seen it myself. Plouffe said that they both did dial groups and they were about the same, showed what you'd expect them to show. And on the abortion question, there was a 40 point advantage, I think, which is unheard of.

I can't tell you, people said, well, the convention didn't change much. It actually did change a little bit. If you look at favorability and other things are better. I think last night there'd be, can't tell you it's going to be dramatic changes, but I would be a little disappointed if she didn't have some... People have more familiar with her and a little bit more of a positive opinion. And the biggest thing she did was talking about turning the page. Hopefully he looks stale and yesterday and I think he kind of did.

BILL KRISTOL:

This is what you stressed four or five weeks ago and I really think she very much stressed that she had that line that I think was prepared. At one point when I guess he was going on about the Biden/Harris administration, blaming her for things and she said, I'm not Joe Biden. I'm certainly not Donald Trump and she took the edge off the first half of that sentence in a sense, by making it an anti-Trump thing ultimately, but I think she really wanted to say that. Don't you think? She wanted to say those words, I'm not Joe Biden.

JAMES CARVILLE:

She went in. I was very clear that she needs to kind of separate her herself from Biden. That's not being disrespectful of anybody. People understand that. What she has here, Bill, is when you think about it, she has a lot of strategic space. She has Dick Cheney and Pramila Jayapal in her coalition, okay, that's not going to last very long, but for right now, hey, whatever you got to say, I'm fine with it. Now the question is, does she pivot? I hate that word, but people use it all the time. What I think she has license to do is, I think the party's, whatever we consider it's base, will allow her great leeway in appealing to more unaligned voters and Trump doesn't have that. In abortion, he's caught. He doesn't have very much strategic space at all because if he goes one way, the pro-life people will get furious. He goes another way and the people that he needs to supplement his base, get furious. He's caught in a pretty bad place there and I can't think of an issue where she doesn't have space to operate.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, well I was struck by that, so let's just talk about it. Let me get back to one question about the vote. I think some people, the race is over last night and all. Other people, the other extreme. It's not clear it'll change any vote share, any ballot test, even though she won the debate. I did see one, that someone told me about a private super PAC that was doing its own focus groups and dial testing, that actually asked the ballot tests, didn't just ask who won the debate. These were undecided voters and soft supporters of both Harris and Trump and there was pretty good movement. I mean it wasn't 80/20, it was more like 45/25, with about 35 still saying, I want to know more, but that's pretty surprising, I think, for a debate. It usually doesn't move the ballot test much at all. Do you think we will see actual movement in the polls?

JAMES CARVILLE:

I hope so, but I'm not very good at predicting these things and probably neither is anybody else.

BILL KRISTOL:

No, of course that's for sure.

JAMES CARVILLE:

Let's say this upfront. Let's just take the economy because I'm working on a piece. The question is not, is it a good economy or a bad economy? I mean, you can ask that and it's fine, but have we got to the point where people feel like they have something to lose? Maybe it's not what I want it to be. I was on the *Wall Street Journal* today, was for the first time incomes are up since the end of the pandemic. 4% is pretty good and they adjust for inflation and everything else when they do that, it's just not a number they pull out. We know the stock market is good. Some said, well, I don't like it overall, but if Trump gets in there and they did a good job, highest tariffs would be bad and economists say this would be bad. I'm sitting there saying, well, I got a little bit more than I thought I did. I tip a little bit higher. I buy an extra magazine at the airport. In your own kind of behavior, other people feel the same way. I think she doesn't need to tell people the economy is great, but I think she now has license to say, you have something to lose and I think that's an important threshold across.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, that's interesting. Any issues that leapt out to you last night and then we'll go forward, that either slight vulnerabilities for her, just to get on the nay saying side again or real strengths

that she can just continue to exploit? Anything that got you slightly worried or other things that you thought, man, she can really go to town on this?

JAMES CARVILLE:

They're going to continue on the 2020 foolishness and she's answered it, but she could have to do it a little bit better and I think she can, but she looked like she knew what she was talking about. She didn't look vapid at all. You know when you introduce somebody as a former prosecutor, Attorney General, United States Senator, Vice President, she honestly, [inaudible] is not particularly engaged. She's like, well, I don't know if she's qualified. I said, I could tell you what. In terms of qualifications, she's the most qualified person to run non-incumbents since maybe old man Bush. You could say what you want about him, but he was qualified by any stretch of imagination. Think she is too.

BILL KRISTOL:

But less well-known. I mean, she had the virtue, we discussed this a month ago, of not having a primary of course and getting the nomination in this somewhat bizarre and unusual way. She had the deficiency of not having to go through a year of debates and speeches and tough interviews. That was why I was nervous the last few days. Presidential debate, as you know, is its own thing and she's never done one of those and she's done one VP debate four years ago and not a whole ton of real big interviews over the last four years. It was impressive that she was as poised and in command as she was, I thought.

JAMES CARVILLE:

I was told, that Philippe Reines, who played Trump, who's very good at it. These guys almost, it's like golf to them. They practice all the time and he was sort of in debate prep, I was told, I can't verify this, that he actually kind of dressed like Trump. He had a blue suit and a red tie, took too long, but he has all of the mannerisms down and I didn't have the sense that she was surprised by anything. I had the sense that she was prepared and you could see the answer. I'm not Joe Biden, but I'm not you either. She was waiting for that, you know that. They said, okay, slow down, say this and there was a guy in debate prep, I'm told, by the name of Michael Sheehan, who was like an MVP that no one ever heard of.

From 1986 on, I would never do a debate without Michael. This is where you're looking when you say the line, you say it five times. The camera angle, what she wore. I liked the outfit she had on when she went on the stage. I think it startled Trump because she's what I'd call a handsome looking woman. She's tall and she looks authoritative and kind of sexist to say it, but who gives a shit, I thought she was dressed very well for it and I think her appearance probably rattled him a little bit out of her shoot.

BILL KRISTOL:

Do you think her walking over to shake his hand, which I don't think he expected.

JAMES CARVILLE:

I thought that was great. She wanted him to get a good look at her. Remember, the last democratic candidate who got look at it was President Biden, which not exactly going to scare you off the stage.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, no. I think her going over there and being totally unintimidated. That was pretty interesting.

JAMES CARVILLE:

All intentional and very, very good.

BILL KRISTOL:

Will there be another debate?

JAMES CARVILLE:

There'll be a debate over the debates because now Trump was saying he won, 91% says he won. He doesn't think they need another. She said that she's willing. Prior to last night, given the latest beta poll, Democrats were getting alarmed. They were feeling a bit better. She's more in control of things now than he is. This is what's changed. [Inaudible] He'll come up and then we'll have a long debate about debates and whether or not she should do long-form interviews or sit down or sit down. This is inevitable. But if the subtle change in position is very favorable to her as she deals with these things going forward.

BILL KRISTOL:

I think it's such an important point. It doesn't always show up, as you say, in the actual ballot tests, in the polls and so forth. But somehow I do feel like there was an inflection point and she now can sort of shape things in a way that wasn't clear that she could a couple of days ago.

JAMES CARVILLE:

I would never let a pollster, do what they call a doubts battery. Bill Kristol is a right-wing authoritarian they said in some op-ed piece and such and such. The question is not: Do you agree or disagree with Bill Kristol's statement? The question was: Are you more or less likely to vote for Bill Kristol having heard this? All right? And I used to hate to get to questions. I don't care if people agree or disagree with it, all right, but what I want to know is: Does this drive voting behavior? Because that's the only thing you really care about.

You made a very astute point that at least one person we know, we don't know for sure, that it did change votes. And the question is not who you think won the debate, it's are you more or less likely, you might ask you a little bit broader, having seen this debate, are you more or less likely to vote for Harris or Trump? Which is much better framing of the question.

BILL KRISTOL:

So what does she do now, do you think? There's people that, "She's got to get out there and do a million interviews." Other people, "No, no, no. You really need to take a week to capitalize on this and ride this white wave as long as you can." And how does this work?

In '92, we were joking about this before the camera started rolling, you were there with Bill Clinton, had a very good debate against George H.W. Bush in, I guess, mid-October '92. And I mean, how do you capitalize on a good debate?

JAMES CARVILLE:

Well, I think you're going to see it. They asked him about immigration. This is my favorite. They asked about immigration. I love this. We need to talk about the issues. If Trump just went out and, okay, so they asked immigration, that was the strongest issue. And he started talking about crowd size.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah.

JAMES CARVILLE:

If I was his campaign manager, I would've stuck a fork in my eye. And I love this Lindsey Graham, "If you just go out and talk about the issues, it's all going to be fine." Of course he can't do that. And he gets the immigration question. By the way, she's pretty good. I think she did pretty well on that question. But he didn't even take advantage of that 'cause he's so massively, he's a massively insecure person. That's the thing to remember about Trump. And we always miss that point. Because his people think he's so ordained by God and King Cyrus

and everything. But he is just insecure about his hand size. He's insecure about his hair. He's insecure about the fact that he's never been part of the Manhattan elite. He's insecure about a lot. And you could just see that coming out. He's just a massively insecure guy, and it was on display.

BILL KRISTOLL:

Yeah, I thought that was a key. So they began with the economy, where I think she did fine. But he did his thing. Then they went to abortion where she did very well, and he's weak on that. But then they came to immigration.

I think despite all the talk about the *ABC* people were so tough on Trump, that was a pretty good sequence for Trump. He got the economy first, then he got immigration third and she gave a good answer. I agree. She emphasized the bipartisan bill that Trump torpedoed and so forth. And she stuck in there, and it really was kind of stuck in, this didn't have anything to do with it, the crowd size point. Right? She's the one who said, "And incidentally, his speeches are boring and the crowds are leaving before they're over." And it didn't have much to do with the immigration answer. But that was very well done. He couldn't resist. Right? As you say, he missed 90 of the 120 seconds of what is his best issue because he couldn't resist saying, "No, that's totally wrong about the crowds."

JAMES CARVILLE:

Right. It just [inaudible]. But I love the issues. "Oh, if we just forgot everything and we just voted on the issues." But the most popular thing that you can propose in American politics was, is and will be raising taxes on the people who make over a half-million dollars a year. I don't know how to tell you that, but that's the issue that will get you 73% every time. But yeah, I thought that was hilarious when he had a chance to run with the issue, he went to crowd size.

BILL KRISTOL:

A lot of people have been saying she should do, follow up with a lot of interviews. I'm not really sure that's right. I mean, what do you think as a tactical matter here?

JAMES CARVILLE:

I don't know. I don't think the public really cares if she sits down with a half hour with Kaitlan Collins.

BILL KRISTOL:

Right.

JAMES CARVILLE:

Or with anybody else. They always have to say something. All right? Whatever you do, it's never going to be satisfactory. And I got some texts this morning from some reporters, "Do you think she needs to sit down?" I said, "I'm not sure she does at all." And the big question people are going to have is: Are we going to have another debate or not? That's what people give a shit about.

BILL KRISTOL:

Right.

JAMES CARVILLE:

I don't know what the audience was last night, but it was a lot. It was tens of millions easily. And who wants to sit there and watch *Meet The Press* for 40 minutes where you're just grilled? I mean not very many people. *Meet The Press* has been very good to my family, but that's just not where people are.

BILL KRISTOL:

I mean, I was thinking about this. Yeah. And also, I just think you can make one slight slip up and suddenly that becomes the story. And I think you can ride this debate for, maybe I'm wrong though, for quite a while. I mean it was a very big deal. Tens of millions of people watched it. It's now going to have second and third day follow-up in terms of clips being shown. Do you agree with that? I mean, she has some time here to ride this. Right?

JAMES CARVILLE:

I totally agree with it. And one of the things that really conspired against him was the last debate was maybe the most significant Presidential debate in Presidential debate history. I mean, it ended up with a candidate having to drop out of the race. So I think just heightened.

And I also really believe that the Trump people, and even some of the non-Trump people, thought he was a great debater. He's never been. I mean, his play against Biden, which is like beating the Chicago White Sox or something, I mean everybody does that.

And a big question I think is, will there be another? And she says, "Okay, I'm fine with that." And he said, "Well, I don't know if I need one." And of course they'll figure something out. When you are asked the inevitable question: When are you going to do a long-form interview? Says, "I'm ready to do another debate. I want to do it where the most people see it and I have best chance to make my case." And you're never going to satisfy them. So it doesn't matter. Just forget about it and just keep talking about the next debate.

BILL KRISTOL:

No, that's good. I like that. No, I'm slightly against the interview focus. I just think it can trip you up in a way that's not helpful. And she's already made her key points.

She could— I mean, the other way to go might be, or a way to go, would be to give some set speeches on major issues. That is a tradition that presidential candidates do. Bill Clinton did it in the fall of '91. She never had a chance to do it, in a sense. But you could. They might not be fascinating, and millions of people aren't going to watch them; but from a media point of view, you give your serious speech at Georgetown on foreign policy and your serious speech at some economic club on economic policy.

JAMES CARVILLE:

The Economic Club is the kind of gold standard. I don't know why. They're destroying economics. But it's easy to get to. It sounds very Middle America and industrial and that. But what's wrong with that?

Yeah, Georgetown, Clinton, we did our foreign policy speech in Georgetown. It's close by. Everybody knows it's got a good brand, take advantage of it.

She could do a China speech. And talk about how it's an adversary but not an enemy. There's a standard foreign policy, Foreign Affairs Magazine. But you can do that, and it's got to be covered. And it will. And she can make news like that.

She can do new economic stuff. She can talk about how tariffs have a very checkered history of doing any good.

I mean, there's a thousand things that she can do. And she can actually take five or six questions, of which you can plant two. Okay?

I mean, that's one of the things. You should never do a town hall, a speech, you can't plant all the questions because it'll be evident that they were planted. But you can say, "Mr. Kristol, you in the back. Oh gee, I'm glad you asked that question. Hadn't thought about until right now, but blah blah." And "Well, God, she's pretty good on her feet. Bill Kristol asked that question and she hadn't thought about it." And of course they've thought about it for five hours.

BILL KRISTOL:

I'm shocked to even hear this discussion of being anything less than perfectly straightforward in a campaign. But I do think the other speeches might answer, sort the media complaints about policy and also let her develop some policy stuff, which could be, it's a way of going to the center in a very careful way, it seems to me, where you could write it up ahead of time so you don't inadvertently get into some controversy where Bernie Sanders is attacking you for the next three or four days. I'm not sure that would hurt, but still.

JAMES CARVILLE:

I wouldn't be surprised if she doesn't do some of that.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah. For me, of course, as a McCain person, I love the moment when she went out of her way, again, this was clearly planned, in discussing Obamacare and healthcare, which is not a McCain special issue, unlike foreign policy. She went out of her way to remind everyone of the moment when McCain showed up on the floor of the Senate when he was already ill and with a thumbs down. And she was a senator then, so it was appropriate for her to reminisce about that. But it was a way of her to say "The late, great John McCain." And then Trump had to remind everyone why he didn't like McCain. But there were quite a lot of people who voted for McCain, and so there's some number of them probably hadn't, were interested that she respects McCain and spoke well of him.

JAMES CARVILLE:

Jimmy, his son, who every time I would see Senator McCain, I think Jimmy was in the Marines. I think he was enlisted Marine for a while.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yes, I think he was. Yeah.

JAMES CARVILLE:

And he'd always bring up Jimmy to me.

Well, Dick Cheney, he didn't say, "I'm torn." He said, "I'm voting for Harris." And I keep hearing from a lot of people, and the same thing is true of *The Bulwark* people and other people, like "We're for Harris. That's it. We're not reluctantly and we've been sucked into this. That's just where we are." And you keep hearing about these people, I won't say their names, but their initials are Rex Tillerson and Jim Mattis, how much they hate Trump and what a giant fool he is, but they won't say anything. Well, if Dick Cheney came out, you can come out and just say, "I'm simply voting for Harris." It's not that hard. You might lose a couple of gin rummy partners at the Dallas Country Club, but such is life. We all have to make sacrifices, don't we?

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah. It's striking how many of them don't want to quite cross that bridge. They'll say things, even sometimes in public, about Trump's lack of judgment and all this other stuff, and then they won't quite pull the trigger, so to speak. Right?

JAMES CARVILLE:

Do what Dick Cheney did.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah.

JAMES CARVILLE:

Okay? Just "I'm voting for Harris." I mean, maybe you don't want to go as far as Liz went and endorse Colin Allred. Okay, I can buy that. But if it's necessary, but just say. And I do think that Cheney saying that is going to make some difference. I mean, you kind of know where it'll make a difference is just certain people, most of them in pretty affluent, traditionally Republican areas. They say, "Well, Cheney's doing it. I guess I can do it too." They needed some permission to do what they were kind of inclined to do in the first place. I think it was important, and I wish more of these types would come out and just say it. You don't have to say anything more than, "I'm going to cast my vote for Harris in the coming presidential election." That's it. You don't need any more than that. [Inaudible] why.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah. As someone who's been involved in the attempt to get Republicans to come out for Harris against Trump and then for Harris, I'd say there's a lot of skepticism, like would it really matter. You think it would, especially if there were more. Don't you think there's some critical mass, and if George W. Bush did, for example? Why is he being so quiet, incidentally? What's that about?

JAMES CARVILLE:

A lot of them are just torn by this. I don't know. Ask him. I think Cheney was bigger than W. I think it gave people more of a license. I don't know how to quantify that. Do I think it's going to be a huge number of votes, no, but it could make a difference in a lot of places that make a difference, in Buckhead and places like that. A lot of places in Maricopa County, Scottsdale, where you're probably going to lose in a normal election 68-32, you might lose 65-35. If you chip away at enough of that, you could do pretty good.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah. There are a lot of people there. There's the George W. Bush, Paul Ryans of the world, the people who served in Trump's own cabinet and own White House, the John Kellys of the world. As you say, Tillerson. I mean, there's a fairly substantial pool of people who could say, "Look, I'm not going to attack the guy for 10 minutes. I'm not going to discuss private conversations we had in the Oval Office. I'm just going to give you my judgment. He shouldn't be president again, and I'm going to vote for Harris." Don't you think that would be enough?

JAMES CARVILLE:

In those WOW counties in Wisconsin, like suburban Republican, traditional Republican counties around Milwaukee, I bet you that Trump does less well there than you would think, and I think that's where this matters.

BILL KRISTOL:

Well, that would really be something. But you think it still would help to get some comfort in the numbers?

JAMES CARVILLE:

Yes, I do. I think people just need an extra shove, because it's hard. I mean, I've voted Democratic all of my life. It's in the DNA, and it's hard to abandon your DNA. Yes, I do. By the way, for every voter in Milwaukee, lethargic, low-potential voter, you get them out and you get one vote. For every WOW county Republican you turn around, you get a net two. I'd rather have a net two than one. I'd take both, but you don't have to make a choice between the two at all.

BILL KRISTOL:

The gender gap, do you agree that it could be bigger than ever in this election? Or is it that people say that all the time, it doesn't quite work? What's your thought on that?

JAMES CARVILLE:

I've always been worried about males. Yes, females are more important than males by a factor of probably 52-48, but 48 is a big number. I hope the gender cap closes, but it closes in a way that we don't lose females but we pick up more, and we may. I have thought, you know how we have every cycle there's a fashionable demographic, the NASCAR dads, soccer moms, national security, the year of the Black female, okay?

I actually think that the demographic that may have the most elasticity in this cycle might be white college males. A, they tend to be much more pro-choice than non-college white males, and B, they're probably doing, because of the markets and other stuff... I don't have a figure in front of me, but I'm pretty safe in saying that more college white males are in the stock market than other demographics, and that we are the least fashionable demographic in America. You could listen to NPR for two weeks and not even know that we exist. I do think there's some elasticity in upward movement for her among college white males.

BILL KRISTOL:

Interesting. Well, that would be worth really looking at.

JAMES CARVILLE:

Right. It's instinct. I can't go to a well of polling data or anything, but it seems like there's real chances there, and I think the abortion stuff is really going to open up some opportunities there.

BILL KRISTOL:

Also, I suppose just Trump looking crazy and chaotic to these people, right?

JAMES CARVILLE:

Yeah. If you are a mid-level banker, you're not impressed with what you saw.

BILL KRISTOL:

Right. On the 2019, 2020 issues that you mentioned where she took these left-wing positions, which she's walked away from but hasn't really explained much why she changed her mind, any ones that strike you as particular vulnerabilities, that you think the Trump people are just going to hammer for the next week or two or three as they try to recover from the debate?

JAMES CARVILLE:

Oh, she has vulnerabilities. I mean, every kind of silly thing they thought. I'd love to know who the political consultant was that told her to do that, because he or she should be summarily horsewhipped. It was a really strange time in the Democratic Party, where I don't know if people collectively thought this was the wave of the future. Of course, it was no such thing, and she's just going to have to say that she grew in experience. I mean, there's good answers to it. I can't tell you there's great answers to it, but she needs to deal with it. I wish it'd have come up more last night. I think you ought to get it out of the way.

That may be where you do a long-form interview. You gotta always want the question. If I were coaching somebody, once you have a sense that, "I hope they don't ask about this," then you've lost. You gotta affirm and say, "I want him to ask me about that, because I'm ready for it." In anything in life, if you want to avoid talking about something, when it comes up, you're not going to do it very well. You gotta put in your mind, "I want that question," and I think she can do that.

The other thing last night gave her, understand, she hadn't been on a national stage that long. Her presidential race was disastrous. She had a not particularly stellar first two and a half, three years as vice president. She's gotta be feeling today like, "Goddamn, I can do this." She should. I mean, just reason says she should. I mean, confidence is a big, big thing in a candidate, a big thing.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, talk more about that. I'm so interested by it. You've been through these campaigns, and what do we have, a little less than eight weeks left here as we speak on September 11th. How will it go now? How fast is the pace? How crazy is it? Does she have time to step back and say, "Well, I really need to address, get out of the way almost, some of these objections about what I said in the past. Maybe I'll give a set speech on that next week." Or is it just frantic, four events a day, or both? What will it be like and how fast and furious will everything be, and how much can she make it a certain way?

JAMES CARVILLE:

We've got some markers coming up. It's September 11th today, but the big marker coming up is October 7th.

BILL KRISTOL:

Interesting.

JAMES CARVILLE:

Okay? That's going to be a bucketload of coverage, a lot of uncomfortableness everywhere, but particularly in some quarters of the Democratic Party. If I'm her, I've got this thing bookmarked, and maybe that's a time to give a speech on, you know, foundations of Middle East policy or something like that. I don't know, but you're not going to escape October 7th. I think October 7th is a more relevant date than September the 11th. Not that I think it's a more relevant event, anything like that, but one is 23 years ago and one is not even a year ago. You gotta be aware of that. That's a big date. That's clearly a place where she could talk— give a speech and take some questions and that kind of stuff.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, that's interesting. I guess in general, I'm struck that... tell me if I'm correctly interpreting this... that you're saying that obviously she'll capitalize on her strengths, the issues she's got a big advantage on over Trump and the characteristics, personal characteristics she has an advantage on, but she also needs to play some defense at the same time that you're playing offense, and prop up your walls, your protection on some of these things where they are going to come after her, whether it's I guess immigration or crime or some of the stuff from 2019, 2020. It would be mistake to think that she had a good debate and therefore she can just forget about it, all these other things are done, finished.

JAMES CARVILLE:

No, no. October 7th is going to come, and it's going to get a lot of attention.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, and these other issues they will make that will give them some attention. The VP debate, October 1st, I guess that's scheduled. I guess that will happen. Will it matter?

JAMES CARVILLE:

Well, you see he threw Vance under the bus last night.

BILL KRISTOL:

Is that right?

JAMES CARVILLE:

Yeah. Harris set it up. "Well, your vice president, J.D. Vance, said this." "Well, I haven't talked to him about that." I think it was on an abortion question.

BILL KRISTOL:

Oh, right, right. Yeah.

JAMES CARVILLE:

The guy has just been a massive disappointment, and he hears stuff particularly from these right-wing Catholics and he goes out and repeats it like it's really smart. I know that you know the childless cat lady thing came right out of Tucker's mouth, in his ear and out of his mouth. That's so Tuckeresque, you don't even have to think twice of where that came from. For the record, he used to work for Bill. I used to do a TV show with Tucker. We know him quite well. You know that's where it came from.

Boy, I'll tell you. She made reference, but what you look for in politics is something sticky. Sometimes it's unjustified, the potato incident or something like that, or, "I didn't have sex with that woman." I mean, I could think of many, many things on our side also. The childless cat lady thing, it's now standard. You don't even need to explain it to people. Then they started talking about the immigrants eating cats. Like, okay, you're just bringing more attention to it. And they can't get away from it. And go, have the debate. People will watch it because Vance is a kind of object of curiosity. He's shown himself to be... something's weird about that guy, and it's going to be interesting. It'll have some play. It'll have some play.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah. Maybe more than a typical VP debate, like our under-card debate, like ours was. Yeah.

JAMES CARVILLE:

Yeah. All we had, the famous 1988. And John Kennedy was a friend of mine.

BILL KRISTOL:

Thank you for reminding. It's good that you can bring up all... the potato, the John Kennedy is a friend of mine.

JAMES CARVILLE:

Right, yeah. But you don't even have to explain these things anymore.

BILL KRISTOL:

True.

JAMES CARVILLE:

They just have become part of... Biden, "We're going to get rid of Medicare." Whatever he said. But it's just funny how Biden doesn't exist anymore, and you can see she was waiting for that. I'm not Joe Biden. That was in her quiver. She was ready for that. She wanted to say that. And then of course, "I'm not you either." That was a good breakaway moment for her.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah. On the negative side for Harris, I've worried a lot about the incumbency. You just can't walk away from it. You're the vice president. It's the wrong track. The country thinks the two favorites were on the wrong track. Biden doesn't have a high favorable rating, so how do you... and I got to say, the attack on her is far left, I think. I'm not sure how successful it was, but that Trump did try to do last night.

The actual tying Biden administration things around Harris's neck, didn't do that much of, and generally she's paid less of a price for that than I would've thought in this campaign. Do you think she still could? Or is it just she's so different from Biden that it doesn't quite stick?

JAMES CARVILLE:

There's a simple factor of American politics that we have to acknowledge. The Democrats have not lost an election since Dobbs, and I include 2022 in that. I don't think this administration is any less popular today than it was in October or November of 2022.

BILL KRISTOL:

No, that's for sure. Yeah.

JAMES CARVILLE:

And I've always alluded. What cracks me up are all these people that say, "This is what the Democratic party..." all these Republicans. There's always been Republicans giving advice to Democrats. "But this is what you really need to do to get your house in order." I'm like, "Well, if the measure's winning elections, we really don't need to get our house in order. We're doing fine. If it's something else, maybe we do." So, I think there's evidence. We've had a bucket load of special elections or referenda. There's been a lot of political activity since the summer of 2022, and it's been almost universally faithful to Democrats, which is in an environment where the Democratic presidential administration is certainly, you'd say, not particularly popular.

BILL KRISTOL:

And you think that's mostly Dobbs?

JAMES CARVILLE:

It's the first place. Yeah, I suspect it is. It was the biggest, mega event that would account for winning elections when you're not particularly popular at the top. Yeah, I think it is Dobbs.

BILL KRISTOL:

And I thought Harris did a good job last night of saying, A, "You appointed these three justices who made overturning Roe possible," and B, she referred over and over to the Trump abortion bans in these different states. Because Trump has in his mind that he can get out of it by saying it's a state's issue, not a national issue now, but maybe not quite so easy. And then there's a question, would you veto a national abortion ban? And all that stuff.

JAMES CARVILLE:

But Democrats, people would not trust us on taxes. We'd come out and say, "Oh no, we're for middle class tax cuts." They don't trust the Republicans on abortion. They don't give a shit what they say. I know who these people are. They're just saying that to say that. And the harder they try... this is another thing I noticed about Trump last night. Most great politicians, and people like Reagan, Clinton, and even Obama come to mind. You never saw them sweat. They never looked desperate. Of course they were trying very hard. Competitive as you can be. He looked like he was really trying last night. He went into an abortion thing. He was talking fast. You could see he was nervous. He was trying to talk around it, and I think voters got a little bit of a sense of that.

He didn't like it. Of course he doesn't believe the shit about abortion, and everybody wanted it, all the legal scholars, everybody wanted it returned to states, of course. But it doesn't do any good to argue with him on that, and I think she did a good job of humanizing the issue.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah. No, I thought that was impressive. I'll let you go in a few minutes, but any last words for Vice President Harris herself? For Governor Walz? The campaign strategists? Still a long way to go, but...

JAMES CARVILLE:

Yeah. I'd say that, a long way to go. People still, for better or worse, know Trump. They both know who you are and Trump are. They're pretty convinced that they know what Trump is.

There's still... I know you had a great debate, you had a great convention, but you still have some more to fill out here. There's no doubt about that. And you got some... always look at the calendar and make the calendar your friend. And I do think that they need to look at the fact that, my sense is there's a little economic momentum out there. It's based on some improved consumer confidence numbers and stuff like that. You certainly shouldn't go out and tell the people that your economy's great or good, but you can imply that you have something at risk now. You start laying tariffs on everything and start doing a lot of herky-jerky stuff, you could make things worse. And I think there's real opportunity there.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah. That's interesting because Biden was criticized, including by you and others, you can't tell people, "The economy's fine. Don't believe what you're seeing." But you think there is now a chance not to say that but to build on what is probably slightly better sense of things. Also, I guess the Fed's going to cut rates in a week, right? A week from today.

JAMES CARVILLE:

That's a big event. September 18th. Okay?

BILL KRISTOL:

Right.

JAMES CARVILLE:

Put that on your schedule. We talked about October 7th. September 18th is going to be a big event because, I know they're going to cut rates. We think it's a quarter point. It may be a half point. But they're going to pick up the paper or the site or wherever they get their new, and they're going to say, "Interest rates may come down." I'm not sure we're not going to be able to... I can see myself maybe getting that house a little bit down the road. But we can't remember interest rate cuts. What our whole recent memory is is to just keep...

I don't quite understand how to do that but I've seen people complain a lot about the Fed. I don't know how you could do it much better than they've done it, honestly. We've gotten rid of inflation. We haven't had massive unemployment. It could all go to hell in a hand basket tomorrow. I'm not suggesting anything other than that, but there's a guy who jumped out of the 40 story building and said as he passed the 20th story, "So far so good."

BILL KRISTOL:

That's always worth reminding—

JAMES CARVILLE:

...until November. After the first week in November.

BILL KRISTOL:

Always worth reminding people of that famous line. And maybe next week is the 19th time when you give your economic speech. Build on whatever positive momentum there is after the Fed rate cut.

JAMES CARVILLE:

The 19th.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah.

JAMES CARVILLE:

I'm all for the Detroit economic [inaudible].

BILL KRISTOL:

I think it's good that we're scheduling the Harris campaign here for them. I'm sure they appreciate this work that we're doing.

JAMES CARVILLE:

I'm sure they all listen in, glued to the podcast

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, I hope so. I'll let you go, but I love that. I love the, "As you pass the 20th floor, everything's fine." It reminds me, it's so much in the same spirit as my favorite John McCain line that he used to love using in speeches, that, "It's always darkest before it turns pitch black." It's a saying.

JAMES CARVILLE:

I like that. Yeah. Yeah, because you expect that the darkest hour is before dawn. It gets dark and then it gets really dark.

BILL KRISTOL:

That was very McCain-like. Anyway, James, any last words or we're good?

JAMES CARVILLE:

No, we're good. Hope we get together after the election hopefully.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah. Or maybe even if there's another debate. We should do another one.

JAMES CARVILLE:

Yeah, absolutely. I love doing it, and I love the work *The Bulwark* does. I think it's really important work. And I think we have some opportunities here.

BILL KRISTOL:

Great.

JAMES CARVILLE:

And once this crisis passes, maybe we can all get back to the way we were. But we don't have that luxury right now.

BILL KRISTOL:

No. We sure don't for the next two months.

JAMES CARVILLE:

No.

BILL KRISTOL:

James, thanks very much.

JAMES CARVILLE:

You bet.

BILL KRISTOL:

And thank you all for joining us on *Conversations*.