

CONVERSATIONS

WITH BILL KRISTOL

BILL KRISTOL:

Hi, I am Bill Kristol. Welcome back to *Conversations*. I'm very pleased to be joined again by Anne Applebaum, the very distinguished author of many important books, articles in *The Atlantic* you need to be reading. And to keep up with what's going on in Ukraine and Europe and the US and the world. I guess your two most recent books are, the most recent was this year, last past year on *Autocracy, Inc.* and before that, what? 2020, I think. *The Twilight of Democracy*. Is that what it was called?

ANNE APPLEBAUM:

That is what it was called, *Twilight of Democracy*.

BILL KRISTOL:

Two upbeat titles, which unfortunately capture the moment, I'm afraid. So anyway, Anne, thanks so much for joining me today.

ANNE APPLEBAUM:

Happy to join you from Warsaw.

BILL KRISTOL:

Well, okay, you'll have to tell us what's happening in Warsaw. Actually, let's begin with Europe. It's the anniversary, obviously, the third anniversary of the all-out invasion of Ukraine, and we want to talk about that some and you've been there and you know so much about it. But let's begin with Europe and the German elections right next door, more or less, to Warsaw, yesterday. What does it mean? What does it mean for Germany? What does it mean for Europe? What conclusions do you draw?

ANNE APPLEBAUM:

So there are a couple interesting things about the German elections. As your listeners probably know by now, the Christian Democrats were the largest party. They won a plurality of votes. This is the center-right party. This was Angela Merkel's party. Historically, they emerged from Christians who after the Second World War, believed that there was a more moral way to do politics.

A long time ago for a book that I wrote 10 or so years ago, I interviewed some very old men who were a part of that movement. So that just places them in history. The new leader, the new Chancellor of Germany will be Friedrich Merz, who has been in and out of politics. He was a businessman. Merkel didn't like him. He came back.

The interesting thing about Merz is that he's someone who all of his life has been a real transatlanticist, so dedicated to NATO, a believer in the US Alliance. And yesterday I believe, he was being interviewed on election day, and he said something that to me was astonishing. He said, "Germany needs to begin to think about becoming independent of the United States."

In other words, the most centrist, the most pro-American, the most pro-NATO piece of the German political spectrum now wonders whether the United States can be an ally anymore. And I think... I don't want to be overly dramatic. There many things are still going to happen and we don't know... Things can change.

But the fact that an important German ally, like that one, says that on TV, and he even said something like, "I can't believe I'm saying this on TV." But that he says it means that there's been a real sea change in Germany. The other part of the story that probably many know, the German far-right party, the Alliance for Germany won about 20% of the vote.

This is actually a little bit less than people thought they might win. They might well have been hurt by the intervention of Elon Musk. In the campaign, he promoted the AFD, he did a live interview with their leader on Twitter. JD Vance also made a subtler and even more insidious intervention in the campaign by denouncing Germany for not being sufficiently in favor of free speech at the Munich Security Conference a few days ago.

And that was also understood in Germany as a kind of attack on the German establishment. It's blatantly not true. The AFD were campaigning, their leader was on TV. It's not like they're some kind of repressed political party, even though some of their members do come very close to violating German law in some of the things they say about Nazi Germany. Germany has special laws, anti-Nazi laws. We can argue about whether we would have them in the United States. But they're not the United States, and they're allowed to have anti-Nazi laws if they want to, given their history.

Anyway, so there is a large, far-right for the first time. A disproportionate number of its votes come from Eastern Germany, from the eastern part of what used to be the Soviet-dominated part of Germany. I can talk about that at length if you want, but we can come back to it.

The main point is that it looks like because a couple of smaller parties dropped out, it looks like Merz will form a coalition. He'll form it probably with the Social Democrats who were the kind of center-left party, were their rival for many years. There are some dangers inherent in this. One of them is that a big centrist coalition... If it doesn't manage to solve problems and give the impression that it's moving forward, does make the possibility of an extremist surge in the next election more likely.

The second problem is I think that the two, the far-left and far-right parties together, may be able to block some changes that Merz wants to make, including to Germany's law about debt. So they want to be able to borrow a lot of money to invest in defense basically. And they're worried. So, there are some traps in the way.

But in terms of leadership in Europe, Merz will be a strong voice. He will be pro-defense. He will pro-Ukrainian. He will want to work with France and Britain and Poland and others to create some kind of new defense alliance within the various alliances. And so, I am going to be positive today and I'm going to say it's a good thing.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah. I want to get to the alliances and the rest of Europe in a second. Just one more note on Germany itself. I guess I'm struck that—we're speaking Monday morning right after the Sunday elections—they fell a little, well yeah 20.7% of vote or something like that, the AFD, Alliance for Deutschland. Incidentally, Vance's intervention was more direct. He supported the AFD. Certainly, on Twitter and said nice things about them repeatedly before coming to even to Munich.

And of course, Musk was just all in including putting a heavy thumb on the scale in terms of X.

ANNE APPLEBAUM:

Algorithms.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah... what was Twitter. There's a very interesting study that showed the degree to which it's not just, oh, the algorithms naturally lead to a certain kind of extremism, which is probably true incidentally as well. But that they actually, if you had a neutral test, so to speak, they push towards the, I guess we're not quite supposed to call it a neo-Nazi party, but I call it an anti-anti-Nazi party. You know, it's not a very... a very far-right party. Anyway.

ANNE APPLEBAUM:

For our purposes, the interesting thing about it is that it's a pro-Russian party. Very actively pro-Russian. And actually, historically anti-American as well, anti-NATO, anti the European

Union. And it's pro-Russian, and of course, the bizarre aspect of this election was, and this has been documented, I've also seen research papers documenting it. There was active Russian support for the AFD, and as you say, active US support for the AFD—

BILL KRISTOL:

Isn't that horrible?

ANNE APPLEBAUM:

...from Musk and Vance. So you had Musk, Vance, and the Russians working together to support this one party, whose most significant arguments are about taking Germany out of European institutions and stopping German support for Ukraine. They also talk about immigration and that seemed important to Vance. But other parties, the CDU is going to be also limiting immigration. So that's not the most important difference between them and the center right. The difference is that they're pro-Russian.

BILL KRISTOL:

What struck me was that, and this is my glass half full. Since you were going in that direction, I'll go in that direction too, this morning. Which is given that 10% was their previous high watermark, so they doubled it. So that's bad.

ANNE APPLEBAUM:

No, it was more like 14 or 15.

BILL KRISTOL:

To 14, okay. And then I guess the left, the post communist party got about six or seven. So you got a quarter plus of the electorate going for the extremes, maybe close to 30%, which isn't great. But given that they were polling at 20% already at the beginning of the campaign, six, seven weeks ago—I looked up the polls—they basically stayed where there were, despite all this intervention. Which does give me some cheer, that the German electorate was not moved by the expenditures, the propaganda, everything that people from the outside tried to do to boost the AFD higher than it started off. So there was obviously a lot of, let's call it latent extremism there in Germany, unfortunately because of—

ANNE APPLEBAUM:

Well, to be clear, the Russian campaign in Germany is 15 years old.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, fair enough. So that wasn't the recent—

ANNE APPLEBAUM:

It's not something they built just for this moment. This has been going on for a long time.

BILL KRISTOL:

But didn't you think, I guess deep in my heart, I thought, geez, these parties often do better on election day than they do in polls, which people don't like to say that for them. I really feared 25%, which would've, and I'm slightly heartened by the fact that they stayed, they had their solid 20% and they didn't increase it basically.

ANNE APPLEBAUM:

They didn't increase it. Certainly the Musk and Vance interventions didn't increase it. That seems pretty clear. So if you want to be cheered by that, then be cheered.

BILL KRISTOL:

I'm going to be cheered. And I'm cheered by what you say about Merz who dabbled a little too much with a certain kind of nativism and all this during the campaign, and even a tiny bit in a complicated way with working with the AFD. But basically, as you say, is a pretty conventional center-right. And will have the similar coalition to what we've had in recent years in the Grand coalition.

ANNE APPLEBAUM:

I think he may be better actually, because he's—

BILL KRISTOL:

Well, no, but I'm saying with them on top. But it's not like we've never had, in that respect, it's... the center held, just to be very simple-minded. And what it didn't hold here, I would say, and hasn't held everywhere... it's sort of held for now in Germany. But you're right to be of course, cautious. So give us the sense, I think you were at the Munich conference. And which was what, just two weeks ago. And you're right there in Warsaw. What is the sense in Germany, I don't know... What sense in Europe, how serious do they hope the US can come back outside? Do they really think they may have to fend for themselves? Do they think they can fend for themselves together or separately?

ANNE APPLEBAUM:

So there has been a series of shocks. The Trump election itself, the Vance speech in Munich, which I'm sure you've discussed already on previous podcasts, which was understood by the people in the room as an insult. Never mind what the speech actually said. It was understood as an insult. Remember who's at the Munich Security Conference? It's defense ministers, generals, security analysts.

I went to an event there where people were talking about, there's a big problem in the Baltic Sea of Russian ships cutting the fiber optic cables that do communication between countries. And this is a very serious sabotage problem. Almost everyone in the room is someone who thinks daily about Russian cyber attacks, Russian sabotage, the potential for Russian military attack, Russian propaganda.

So they're focused on solving a particular problem. And Vance walked into the room and basically said, "I don't care about your problem. I'm going to talk about something different, and I'm going to insult you while I'm doing it." So everyone got that message. And then I also think that the last few days, Trump repeating Russian propaganda. Trump saying Zelensky is a dictator. Russia started the war. Making up statistics about how much money the US has spent.

BILL KRISTOL:

Ukraine.

ANNE APPLEBAUM:

Ukraine started the war, excuse me, the Ukraine started the war.

BILL KRISTOL:

It's hard for you to make yourself say that, it's such an unbelievable Orwellian lie.

ANNE APPLEBAUM:

It is. So, Ukraine started the war. But also making up numbers, acting as if Europe had no role in supporting Ukraine. Actually, if you total up the money, both economic and military, Europeans have given more to Ukraine than United States and paid a larger price in all kinds of other ways as well. All of that as a package did make people like Friedrich Merz say, "Is the United States still our ally?" And you've had some really extraordinary editorials. *The Financial Times*, which is not exactly like a beacon of anti-American radicalism, ran a big

editorial questioning whether the United States was a European ally or a European adversary, others have been saying the same. And it suddenly makes a whole series of things look different. And not just defense, I mean, I'll talk about defense in a second, but economic relationships, business deals.

There are a lot of things that Europeans do as a kind of homage to the United States. Buying certain kinds of American products or big investments, investing in American defense technology, by accepting the dominance of American tech companies. All of that has taken place in the context of a world in which the US and Europe were somehow on the same page, in which we cooperated together and we weren't perceived as threats to one another. And really very suddenly all that looks different. And I can't tell you right now exactly what the implications will be or whether it can be reversed by further actions down the line. I mean, I suspect among other things that Putin doesn't really want to end the war. And so, I don't know exactly what the... I still have no idea what Trump is talking about when he says the war will end this week or it'll end by May. I'm not sure what he means.

But all those things suddenly begin to look different. And the conversations happen in all kinds of contexts. So in boardrooms, in government offices, everyone who deals with the United States in any context is suddenly saying, "Wait, are all the assumptions that I've based 30 years of decisions on or 80 years of decisions on, are all those assumptions wrong?" And again, maybe this is going to be reversed and maybe it's not going to be as extreme as people think. But the rapidity of the shift did take people by surprise. I mean even though it was predictable, everyone should have seen it coming, et cetera, et cetera, it's still, the last two weeks felt really fast. The US is done and they're saying so in a very clear way. And that I think is going to have ramifications that will last for a long time.

I mean, in terms of whether the Europeans can help Ukraine, the answer is yes. Again, their help has been really key so far. The missing piece is that the Europeans are part of NATO and the leader of NATO is America and the supreme allied commander of NATO is an American. And so all of the decision-making processes all run through the United States. The assumption that the US would lead has been part of the NATO structure. And so rethinking that structure or rethinking how Europe could act together differently outside of that structure is not something you can do in five minutes, to be fair to Europeans.

I mean there is something like a coalition of the willing emerging, and it certainly includes Scandinavia, the Baltic States, Poland, now Germany, UK, France, depending on their elections, Romania, and a handful of other large countries, maybe Italy, maybe Spain, they're a little farther away from the war and they don't feel it as sharply. But there's clearly a group of countries who feel directly that Russia is a threat to them economically, as I said, in cyber, in sabotage in many other ways. And you'll see them working together, they will be making heavy defense investments. I mean, the big argument in Germany is going to be, how much money, can we finally borrow money? Germans have weird rules about debt. You're not allowed to have debt in Germany. That's another historical hangover. And so, there may be an attempt to create a defense bank. I mean, basically they need a lot more defense spending right now and I think they'll—

BILL KRISTOL:

They don't have the ability to...

ANNE APPLEBAUM:

I think they'll do it, I mean, the question is—

BILL KRISTOL:

You can't flip a switch and have—

ANNE APPLEBAUM:

...how fast can it be done? That's the problem.

BILL KRISTOL:

Right. And you can't flip a switch and have the munitions capabilities and so forth.

ANNE APPLEBAUM:

I mean, there's some elements to the war that I think people don't really understand. So the war is—

BILL KRISTOL:

Let me just come back to the Europe thing, one thing, just to clarify something. I'm very struck when you say it's very important, just I want to put a pin in this, that there is this coalition of the willing, and I expect you to say, and you said the Scandinavians, the Balts, Poland, Czech Republic, probably some others. And then you said pretty matter-of-factly, “and Germany and France and the UK.” I mean, I think three years ago, we would've said before the war, I suppose, it's not obvious that Germany in particular would be part of a coalition of the willing against Russia. Germany had done a lot to be a major trading partner of Russia, and of course there was the energy issues and so forth. UK had sort of left Europe foolishly in 2016 or left the EU. And France, France is always a bit of a wild card.

I'm just struck, and I'm not quarreling, I'm just saying explain a little more, or maybe I'm wrong to be surprised by this, but I guess I'm struck that you're fairly confident that Europe as a whole sees letting Putin win in Ukraine as unacceptable.

ANNE APPLEBAUM:

So remember that all three of those countries, Britain, France, and Germany, have all been the subject of, again, Russian sabotage, Russian murders of people in London and Salisbury. The Germans are under a huge amount of pressure from Russian propaganda and Russian political spending and are now very aware of mistakes made in the Merkel era. At least I'm talking not about all Germans, I'm talking about the leadership, what's about to be the leadership of the country. So the CDU and people around it in that world, the Christian Democrats, they've been convinced... I mean, well, I don't want to direct attention to myself... I made a big speech in Germany a few months ago. I won a big prize and there was a lot of... And in the speech I said, the moral thing to do right now if you're afraid of autocracy returning is to support Ukraine, and pacifism is a false argument to be made in these circumstances. It's like being a pacifist in 1938. And I expected a big pushback that that would be a very unpopular thing to say in a big venue in Germany, and it turned out not to be. So it turned out that it was heard and accepted and that idea was okay with a lot of Germans who I didn't think... And that's just a little tiny example. I mean—

BILL KRISTOL:

No, that's important, that's important.

ANNE APPLEBAUM:

Those ideas are now mainstream and they're acceptable and they're felt really strongly. I had a book published in Germany. I do a lot of public events in Germany. There are enthusiastic emotional crowds of people who are worried that if Ukraine were to fall or Ukraine were to collapse, that the next thing that would happen would be a push on Poland and Germany. You don't have to be on a border with Russia to be under Russian attack, remember that.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, no, that's very interesting.

ANNE APPLEBAUM:

They feel it really strongly. So I can say that for sure about Germany. I mean obviously, and the threat from the AfD, as I said, is primarily a threat of what's perceived to be correctly as a pro-

Russian party. UK is the same. In the UK, both the current Labour Party and the Tory Party have also been very loud in support of Ukraine and very clear about their... They've also had huge cyber threats from Russia.

I mean, actually I was in London a few months ago and just bizarrely— so the British Library, which is one of the great cultural institutions of the English-speaking world, lost an enormous amount of data. I think it lost access to all of its files because of a Russian cyber attack. And people were talking about that when I was in London. So there's this feeling that Russia is a problem for the UK and all kinds of... The Russian money in London has been very notable and obvious over the years, and people have turned against the Russian oligarchs who were living in London for such a long time. So there's been a kind of sea change there as well.

France is more complicated, partly because the... France also has a big pro-Russian party, and that was Marine Le Pen's—it's changed its name several times—but Marine Le Pen's French far-right party. Actually, at the start of the war three years ago, she changed her rhetoric somewhat because public opinion went very anti-Russian and she doesn't use the same language. She actually had funding from Russia in the past. So it was not even very subtle. But she also became more cautious about supporting Putin and so on.

Certainly Macron remains somebody who feels burned by Putin. He tried to talk to Putin, Putin made fun of him, made him look like an idiot. And there's a strong feeling that security of France also is security of... Ukraine is part of French security as well. I mean, I don't know. In the case of France, I don't know whether that will last the next presidential election, but that's only two or three years from now. So I mean, there's time.

Also, France has been talking about becoming independent of the United States for a long time. This is the moment that some people in France have been waiting for. So, I don't know. There's a slightly different story in each one of those three countries, but right now anyway given who's currently in charge, I think their feelings about this are pretty solid. But whether it will last, I cannot tell you.

BILL KRISTOL:

No, who can? I mean, the kind of shocks we've delivered, very hard to predict what the second and third order effects are, including a reaction in the other direction, as you've been saying, in a way more of a sense that they have to assume a burden. But on the other hand, practically speaking, the US has been so central, of course, to NATO and to the whole just defense enterprise, just as a practical matter in terms of capabilities and stuff that it's a little daunting.

Well, you were about to say something about that. So let's look at that side. I mean, what's going to happen with Trump? We don't know if US policy is going to go even worse or go slightly backwards, a tiny bit towards a less radical version of Trump-Vance-ism or whatever. But I mean, say what you think would actually... You've been in Kiev several times. What will happen over the next several months in the actual war in your judgment, or could happen?

ANNE APPLEBAUM:

Obviously I don't know what's going to happen, but I think that—

BILL KRISTOL:

Right. No. But I mean, how dire is the situation?

ANNE APPLEBAUM:

There are some aspects of the war that I don't think are well understood. So, this is a drone war. It's a war in which tanks, the big thing that the US can deliver and there was a big argument about whether the US should give them or not a couple of years ago.

Tanks, I won't say they're useless, but they're not as useful as we thought they would be. And generally speaking, big, sophisticated, expensive pieces of equipment, maybe with some exceptions of defense equipment—air defense—turn out to be less useful than we thought as

well. It doesn't mean they're useless, but this is a drone war. When I first went to Kiev, I went to Kiev in April 2022, six weeks after the invasion, to interview Zelensky with the editor of *The Atlantic*, Jeff Goldberg. And at that time, we saw some drone workshops. And the drone workshops of that era, they were in people's garages. And literally, I mean, that summer, I went back and I saw some of this stuff and we saw it again the following year. They look like people are making drones out of cardboard and glue. I mean, literally, that's what it looks like.

Fast-forward to last year. Last year, the Ukrainians in factories made one and a half million drones. And this year they're on schedule, I was told, to make four million drones. Maybe it's not that high, but it's several millions. They're making their own drones. More to the point, they have their own software. Some of it has been, they have lots of help from the tech community in the US and Europe, but there are also Ukrainians who have been designing ways to fight the war because no bespoke, excuse me, no prepared product that someone gives you from Silicon Valley, when you bring it to the frontline in Kharkiv, it doesn't work. You have to redo it so that it works for your circumstances.

I have also been in, last September, I was in an underground control room where dozens of soldiers, mostly wearing t-shirts, were sitting in front of computers, and they essentially had the whole frontline. They could see the whole frontline, and they were coordinating drone operations across the front line from this place. That kind of stuff, that's how the war is really being fought. And obviously the Ukrainians need bullets and they need the long-range missiles. There's a lot of stuff they need US intelligence, but a lot of the war is they're better prepared to fight it than you think they are, just because the nature of the war has changed.

The most important things to supply Ukraine with are going to be air defense so that they can continue pushing back against Russian air attacks. And by the way, a couple of days ago, the Russians launched one of the largest air attacks that they've launched in the entire war. It was something more than 260 different kinds of drones and missiles. And that's from somebody who—they'd just been negotiating with the Americans in Riyadh. So the Russians aren't showing any indication that they want to stop. But the Ukrainians are able to hit thousands of Russian targets every month. I've seen the list of what they can hit. They are killing far more, something like seven to one. So they kill seven times more Russians than Ukrainians. They are in a position to continue fighting, I would guess, for at least six months and maybe a year without that much more help.

So it's not as dire as you think. I mean, the thing that worries me the most about Ukraine is a psychological, what will it mean to Ukrainians if the US government turns on them? Will people become demoralized? That I just don't know. Wars have also psychological elements, and the Ukrainians, that's why they pushed back against the Russians in 2022. This is why Kiev wasn't taken because the Ukrainians said, "No, we're brave and we're going to stop them," and they did. And that was part of why they won the first battle of Kiev. And I just don't know how the comments of Trump will affect people fighting on the ground and working on behalf of troops. So it's very hard to say, but they do have cards. They're better prepared now. They have an army that's a million people strong. For fighting this particular kind of war, they are not in a bad position. And so there's no feeling there that this front line is about to collapse.

BILL KRISTOL:

That's good. And I do think... I mean, Trump has gone very far in the direction he's gone in and all the talk about Keith Kellogg. He's pretty pro-Ukraine, and he's going to make a difference. That seems a little farcical right now at least. But I think especially if Ukraine doesn't collapse and if the fight slogs along unsatisfactorily but not disastrously for Ukraine, and if Putin is unreasonable and won't take yes for an answer, which is quite possible since he wants to destroy Ukraine and conquer Kiev and, as you've argued many times, not simply have a little more territory, I mean, he might take that as a temporary thing, but he might not even take that as a temporary thing at this point.

I wonder if in the US there couldn't be more of a reaction against what Trump's doing than people think, including by the Republicans in Congress? And I'm the last person to put any hopes in them at this point, but half of them did vote for aide for Ukraine less than a year ago.

Are they literally going to, just because Trump decides he's... Not decides. Trump has been a friend of Putin's and remains a friend of Putin's so to speak, or an ally Putin's almost. Are they simply going to give up on that? It wouldn't take that many Republicans to join the Democrats to conceivably stop Trump from doing a [aid] package, even? I guess I'm slightly more hopeful than some people that... I mean, generally presidents have a huge amount of power on foreign policy, very hard to override them when they're going at a certain direction. And sometimes that's good and sometimes that's bad. This time, it's very bad, I think. But I don't know. So for whatever it's worth my sense of if it could snowball in a very bad direction, or the opposite could happen. If it turns out that this attempt by Trump to sort of collapse in a sense, the fight against Putin doesn't work, you could get some others saying, here, "Wait a second, we shouldn't go in this direction." Maybe I'm being too hopeful.

ANNE APPLEBAUM:

Well, there's another... I mean, it's almost a bigger issue than that. I mean, it's not just about Ukraine. Do Americans want to be allied with Russia against Europe? Is that how we see ourselves in the world? I don't know that all Americans have supported our foreign policy. In fact, I'm sure they haven't all supported our foreign policy over the last several decades. But to switch from one day to the next from being a country that at least defined itself in theory as the leader of the democratic world to a country that defines itself as an ally of Russia against the democratic world, people want that? I don't think so because that then begins to touch on Americans' self-definition. I mean, who are we? What kind of a country are we? Are we a kleptocracy in an oligarchy like the Russians? Is that what we are now? I am not 100% sure that everybody wants to see their country that way.

It's one thing to have an America that wants to be a good and nice country and sometimes fails, which we could say was the case in recent years. And it's another thing to be a country that is overtly bad. I mean, overtly seeks to help other dictatorships destroy other societies and seeks to... whose leaders are looking out for their own financial interests and don't care about the prosperity of their own people. I mean, we're then shifting into being something very different. I don't know that all Americans want that. My guess is no.

BILL KRISTOL:

No, I think that's well said. And a very important point. I mean, the dangers you well know, and you've written about this, is at some point there'll be a reaction, I think. A huge amount of damage could be done before the reaction takes hold. We're having a race, in my view, between a... I think a reaction has begun against Trump and against Musk. And a lot of it is just based on more common sense, what are they doing with the government and why are they treating people this way? My cousin works for the government and the government has a little bit of fat, sure, but we can't treat public employees this way. Some of it's just that, and some of it is actual policies, they're going to cut Medicaid and so forth. And then some of it is Ukraine, I think. And both the more the sympathy for Ukraine, quite Ukraine, and some of it is the broader point you just made very well.

So I think there will be... I don't think the odds are that great that Trump and Musk are going to be wildly popular in two or three years. Their policies aren't going to work, I don't think, at home or abroad. But is the damage they do so great that at that point it becomes very hard to put the pieces back together? I think that's both the problem here... And maybe more so in foreign policy because the infrastructure is more fragile, so to speak, don't you think, in the world order than it is here at home.

ANNE APPLEBAUM:

Well, we'll see. I mean, as I said, some of this is so new to people. I mean, frankly, it's not new to me, but it's new to leaders of most European countries and it's new and how people will adjust. We'll see. I mean, it will be very hard, if not impossible, for the United States ever to build up the credibility it enjoyed six months ago in Europe.

BILL KRISTOL:

Which is a terrible thing to say.

ANNE APPLEBAUM:

Anytime soon.

BILL KRISTOL:

And that's a very bad thing. It just in and of itself. I mean, you're a student of autocracy. The two books really were the first on the *Twilight of Democracy* and the second on *Autocracy, Inc.* You've been watching what's happening here, the Defense Department purge, the let's get rid of the JAGs, especially because God forbid there should be attorneys telling the military that this might not be a lawful order, FBI with Patel. I mean, has it gone faster than you expected? More radical in tone and in purpose than you expected? I rather thought he might try to boil the frog slowly, but I think they've gone for the opposite shock and awe strategy.

ANNE APPLEBAUM:

They're doing what I thought they would do and what they said they would do. This is what Project 2025 was. It's what all kinds of people said they wanted. It's what Russell Vought said he wanted. They are seeking to traumatize and terrorize the civil service, and government workers more broadly, which includes the military, in order to create not a civil service of the kind we have now, which is loyal to the Constitution and works for Democratic and Republican presidents and is promoted on the basis of meritocracy, but instead is civil service that is loyal to Trump or to Trump's cult or whatever we're calling it. And that has something... I have seen that happen before. It happened in Poland actually in 2015. I mean, because it's Poland, it was less important and there was less drama and so on. And it's what happened in Hungary over a number of years. It's what happened in Venezuela. It doesn't have to be a right wing process. It's what Hugo Chavez did. He famously fired 19,000 workers at the state oil company and therefore destroyed the state oil company.

So the idea that you have to take control of state institutions and you have to make them work for you personally rather than for the people or the nation as a whole, this is something that every illiberal leader elected and unelected sooner or later thinks they need to do, and I did expect that Trump would do it.

I didn't have the imagination to know or to think that you could do it by going into government agencies and becoming the system administrator of the computer systems.

BILL KRISTOL:

Right.

ANNE APPLEBAUM:

So, this piece of it is original to the United States, and this is something that I think Americans should know. This is more radical than anything any European far-right party has ever done. There is no precedent for Musk taking his team of teenage engineers going into the US Treasury and taking charge of the payment system. And nor is there any precedent for Musk personally deciding which programs he likes and dislikes and which ones he wants to freeze.

This is not being done by any kind of process. Not only is Congress not involved, it doesn't even look to me like other members of the administration are involved. Trump seems only vaguely aware of what Musk is doing. Some of the stuff they've done, like the destruction they've wrought on USAID, which I can talk about if you want, because I've spent a lot of time talking to people from there in the last few days. But that wasn't telegraphed during the campaign. Nobody was angry that the US was helping Sudanese refugees.

There was no narrative against them. Nor were Americans really worked up about USAID's support for independent media, which is tiny amounts of money, in places where there's no free media. But Musk has decided that all these things count as waste and fraud, even though these

are congressionally mandated programs, and he's been saying that that's what he's doing. The fact that he's printed these lists of fraud that he supposedly found that are untrue, that he keeps mentioning things that he's cut, which turn out to be fake...

No, there were not \$50,000 of condoms going to Gaza. No, there was not money being paid to Chelsea Clinton. No, there was no money that was being paid to *Politico*, the website. So they keep claiming to be doing things. And so all of which leads me to conclude that as I suspected the Department of Government Efficiency is not really interested in efficiency.

What it's interested in is what you have to call regime change. It's interested in changing the civil service, politicizing it, politicizing the state. It's what political scientists call "state capture," and they are, and that's the program. And I wrote this in *The Atlantic*, but it's also... I wrote about it in *Twilight of Democracy* in 2020. I wrote about it in the context of Poland, like what was motivating it and what made people support it, but it's, again, not that original. It's been done a lot of times and places.

The original piece is the way Musk is doing it. That's very radical and new.

BILL KRISTOL:

And I would say for me, I expected Trump acquiescent and Trump loyal people to be put in places like DOJ and the FBI and DOD and the Defense Department. I didn't really expect Kash Patel and originally Matt Gaetz and then Pam Bondi and Pete Hegseth. I mean, that's just a level below lack of competence and lack of qualifications, which of course is not a bug, but a feature, right?

You want people who are utterly and totally dependent on you personally, Donald Trump, not someone who has any independent standing.

I was talking with someone who served a very high position in the military in the first Trump administration, and he made the point that it wasn't that easy to make these people do things they thought were really wrong. Not just because they legally could say, "I'm sorry, I can't do that." They had a whole network. They were well-established figures. They had many, many friends and colleagues across the military and across the US government. If General Milley to take an obvious example in 2020 had resigned, all the other chiefs would've resigned. A ton of three-star generals would've resigned. Maybe the Secretary of State would've felt he had to resign, Pompeo.

I mean, the degree to which Trump has got people who have no authority or independent standing. I think your own work on autocracy has emphasized that point, and he's gone further in that direction, I guess, than even I expected.

ANNE APPLEBAUM:

I think it's also really important to understand that this is not a conservative movement. It's not even... I wouldn't even say it's a right-wing movement. I mean, it's the wrong way to think about it. It's something... This is a radical movement. These are people whose understanding of the world comes from online conspiracy theories. They are not based in reality. They are skeptical of science. They're skeptical of all existing institutions, whatever they do, whether it's the FBI or the Army. They're not the kinds of people who have ever been in the US government before.

And so there's a qualitative difference. You see, online, people saying, "Oh, well, Reagan started it, and this is the obvious conclusion of the conservative revolution or the conservative movement." No, this is not. This is a break from the conservative movement. It's a break from 80 years of foreign policy. It's a break from more than a hundred years of having an independent civil service.

The independent civil service also has a history. It comes from the late 19th century when Theodore Roosevelt was one of the leaders of something called civil service reform. Before that, prior to that, we had a system called the spoils system, which was essentially patrimony. The patronage rather, sorry. Whoever was in power got to hire and fire everybody, the postmasters in all the states and so on, and hire whoever he wanted. And that meant that these

were people's cousins and they were brother-in-law and they weren't qualified. And Theodore Roosevelt started the idea that there should be a permanent civil service that has qualifications and that developed over more than a century.

And so Trump is breaking with two very important, very long-standing pieces of bedrocks of American domestic and foreign policy. And one of them, the independent civil service, and the other is the network alliances. And those are very radical things to do, which no previous Republican or Democratic President, however, left or right wing has done. Not since 1945.

BILL KRISTOL:

No, absolutely right. That's really well said. And also the patron system. It's one thing to have a patron system when you have a very small federal government, and mostly you're appointing semi-qualified or unqualified people to be local postmasters or maybe to be administering a few GI benefits for civil war veterans. Even there, it blew up and that's why they had civil service reform. It's another thing when you're running massive Medicare, Medicaid, Social Security, NIH programs, right? I mean, the level of damage that can be done just by this, I think, is great.

I'll let you go in a couple of minutes. It's the third anniversary of the war, obviously, of the attack by Putin on Ukraine. You've covered it so closely. You've been there several times. You wrote about it this morning in *The Atlantic*. Just say a few words about what we should be thinking about on this day.

ANNE APPLEBAUM:

I think everyone should think back on how they felt at the time of the invasion. I was supposed to go to Kiev that week, and I didn't go because all the planes stopped flying a couple of days before the attack. And I was back in Washington, and I wound up staying up all night and watching it on television, and I was convinced that Kiev would fall.

I was terrified for people that I know. And then we watched it turn around and it turned around, as I said, because of real bravery, because Ukrainians could do clever things with less weapons, because the Russian army was totally unprepared, because Putin didn't understand that there is such a thing as a Ukrainian nation, and it did want to defend itself, and it wasn't a fake creation of the United States or whatever Putin believed. I think back on that and think where we are now and we now have this enormous Ukrainian army, and Ukraine has links and contacts all over the world and allies all over the planet and friends inside the United States and Europe. It's an amazing achievement. Let's take a step back and think where we were and where we are.

The Russians did not win. They cannot win, actually. I don't think they can win without Trump. They could not win on the battlefield. Supposedly the second-largest army in Europe has been blocked by what was supposedly what they thought and what they described as a bunch of peasants. And it's just a reminder to us all of the hubris of great powers, which has hit us at times in our history, and also the weakness of the autocratic message. The Ukrainians believe in grassroots democracy, in an open society. They have created networks of civil society who help the army and who work in defense. The army itself is, mostly at this point, a civilian army. People were doing different kinds of jobs three years ago, and yet they have put up this extraordinary defense.

I mean, I think whatever happens next, the example Ukraine has set other societies for how you resist autocracy and how you stand up to violence and brutality. I mean, it's a great example for all of us. It's a beacon of hope.

BILL KRISTOL:

Well, thank you, Anne. That was really lovely, and I hope we don't succeed in betraying them, and I rather think we might not be... Trump may not be quite able to pull this off as much as he might like to. So thank you for those words about Ukraine. Thank you for the analysis, obviously of Europe and the US autocracy, democracy. Thanks really for everything you've been writing over the long time since we've known each other, and you've been writing on this for a long time back in the eighties and nineties, that *Gulag*, such a wonderful book, really authoritative book. When was that published?

ANNE APPLEBAUM:

It was 2003. I was working on it in the nineties.

BILL KRISTOL:

Okay, great. Well, anyway, hopefully, that's... Well, I won't even go into whether that should be... Hopefully, *Gulag* is part of history and it's not as much part of history maybe as we hoped and thought when the book came out, but here we are. But thank you for everything you've been writing and doing. Thank you for joining me on *Conversations*.

ANNE APPLEBAUM:

Thank you.

BILL KRISTOL:

Thank you all for joining us.