

CONVERSATIONS

WITH BILL KRISTOL

BILL KRISTOL:

Hi, I am Bill Kristol, welcome back to *Conversations*, I'm very pleased to be joined again by John Bolton, former national security advisor to the president, a former senior official in the State Department, and the Justice Department. Someone I've known for a long time, I worked with when I was in government ages and ages ago. John and I, we had a conversation the day before Thanksgiving, I think it was, very late November, so not that long ago. And that stands up quite well, I think, some of your concerns and your predictions really, about what might happen. But let's talk about—we're talking on Monday, May 5th—on Friday, or Thursday, maybe it was, Mike Waltz, one of your successors was national security advisor, was fired by Donald Trump. We now have this unusual situation, Secretary of State acting also as national security advisor, at least for a while. But anyway, John, thanks so much for joining me, and joining us again today.

JOHN BOLTON:

Yeah, glad to be with you, a lot going on.

BILL KRISTOL:

It is amazing. In November, you were worried that Trump, much more than in the first term—and a reaction, I suppose, against the first term, where people like you, as he saw it, constrained him, and so forth,—was going to have, as you put it, yes men and yes women, and just a demand, not only loyalty, which is appropriate, but fealty. And so, here we are a few months later, well, three months into the administration, just over that, how much is that characterized what's happening? And then talk about Mike Waltz in particular, and his fate after 100 days.

JOHN BOLTON:

Well, I'm afraid, unfortunately, I turned out to be right, in case after case, we see people simply accepting what Trump says without doing what advisors and senior officials should do, just not try to box the president in, but to say, "Well, Mr. president, have you thought of A, B, C, D and E? Have you considered this information? Have you looked at these other options? Have you considered the following pros and cons? The president's going to make the final decision on matters that presidents make decisions on, Trump makes more decisions on more trivial things than any other president I've worked for, but that's what he likes to do, go look at the drapes at the Kennedy Center again, because he's chairman of the board. So, the decisions are his, but you hope in a well-functioning government for well-informed decisions, having the facts available on which to base decisions that are inherently judgments, where you're rarely going to have facts all lined up one way or the other, where competing options should be considered. Looking at which may be better, what tweak can you make that will make a presidential idea better?

But I don't think Trump wants that, I think he wants pretty much what he said to me, and Mike Pompeo, about two months into my holding the national Security advisor job. We were in Brussels at the NATO summit, trying to persuade Trump not to withdraw from NATO in the spring of 2018, and getting a little frustrated, Trump turned to Pompeo and said, "I knew I should have made Keith Kellogg national security advisor, he only gives me his opinion when I ask for it." So, I think Mike Waltz may have made my mistake, and done what a national security advisor does, give advice that Trump didn't want to hear. And I think it's unfortunate, I viewed Waltz as somebody who would by and large, far more frequently than not offer good advice to the president, and he hoped that the President could take it, but that obviously has not worked out.

BILL KRISTOL:

Is it your sense that Waltz was more inclined that way? Of course, national security advisor is its own particular job, unlike secretary of state, or secretary of defense, or DNI, director of national intelligence, but is your impression that Waltz was more, let's say, independent in his thinking, not in his acting, not in a disloyal way, but trying to not simply be a yes person to Trump? I think Alex Wong, who was Waltz's deputy, who I think may also be on his way out, that's certainly been the reports, worked for you, didn't he, in the first term in the National Security Council?

JOHN BOLTON:

Well, Alex worked at the State Department, but I knew him from the Romney campaign, there's another strike against him in the Trump administration. Obviously, in Waltz's case, the Signal chat group in and of itself may have been fatal, but Pete Hegseth, who was the one who put the most sensitive information into the chat is still in his job, and it may have been that Waltz could have found a way to work himself out of it. I give him credit, he took responsibility for it, which is a rare thing in a Trump administration, where it's always somebody else's fault. And from the best we can see, Waltz was harassed by people who charitably could be called crazy for not being sufficiently loyal to Trump. He found four or five of his senior directors on the NSC fired for not being loyal, people he had personally hired, and Alex Wong came under attack in the same way, and ultimately Waltz himself did.

This goes to this question of what exactly is the kind of opinion you should have around a president, certainly in the national security space? I am not arguing that a presidency has to have all opinions, all philosophies, all ideologies represented, I'm not arguing that Elizabeth Warren should have a major place in national security affairs. But I'm saying within the Republican universe—at least, we used to have a universe—there are divergent views, people understand that, they also understand the president makes the final decision, and that unless it's something you can't stomach, in which case you resign, you carry out the president's decision. He got elected, as Jim Baker always used to say, "He's the guy who got elected, and that's it." But it doesn't mean you have uniformity of opinion. Even if you want to do X, for example, make Greenland more secure from the perspective of US national security, there are lots of ways to do that.

We looked at this when Trump asked in the first term. If Trump gets up one morning and says to his top advisors, "I want to invade Greenland and take it over," you don't say "Yes, sir." You say, "Well, Mr. President, have you thought of the potential consequences? Have you looked at the alternative of amending the Defense of Greenland Treaty from 1951 with Denmark?" There are things that the president should have in front of him so he can say, "That's actually a better idea." Or, "No, I still want to invade Greenland," that's his prerogative. But what you've got when you have total uniformity is simply people saluting before anybody's thought of whether there are better alternatives, or whether the consequences of a particular decision is bad.

And that I think may be the explanation for why Waltz was fired, they're very interesting media reporting that Susie Wiles got involved in this, geostrategist that she is, saying, "Waltz doesn't fit in the Trump administration." Well, I beg to differ, he fits in a presidency that wants strong advisors around him, who's not afraid of people with strong opinions, who knows, is self-confident enough to understand he's the president, and will actually get things done, and will correspondingly expect those who disagreed with him in the inner councils of the administration to carry out his orders once he makes them. That's not what we've got in the Trump administration today, and every sign is it's only going to get worse.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, that's exactly what I was going to ask. My sense is you had a tough time—Donald Trump being Donald Trump—in establishing a kind of more traditional, let's say, interagency process, all the options are considered. So not just you, but others could weigh in with their own views, Secretary Pompeo or Secretary Esper, or whatever, on different issues, not the department's view, of course, in terms of their own particular expertise or equities, but also their general view of things. I don't know, you describe it in the book, you had a process that I think was at least a cousin of a traditional process maybe, with Trump's interjections. Do you feel like in the

first 100 days, was Waltz... It just seems from that Signal chat, and say a word about that too, just to ask from a security point of view, just from reading that it just seems like it's nothing resembling an orderly process.

JOHN BOLTON:

I think that's the best conclusion you can draw from the outside, it was widely reported in the first weeks that Waltz or people acting at his direction told the vast majority of professionals who were detailed to the National Security Council staff, from the State Department, Defense Department, the Intelligence Community Treasury, Homeland Security, Justice Department, all the different departments and agencies that make up the national security community, and that by and large provide the majority of the staff. Just like in the State Department, the overwhelming majority of the staff are career employees, the majority in the NSC staff have always been career employees, with significantly more political appointees at the NSC, as is appropriate. But they were all basically told, go home, don't come to work anymore, basically don't call us, we'll call you.

Which I would have to think reduce the staff to a skeletal crew, primarily of political appointees, who may be fine people, I just don't know, but dramatically reducing the NSC's capability to have oversight over what's going on in all the different departments and agencies in the national security community. That structure essentially has gone through a lot of variations, but in its present form, essentially organized by Brent Scowcroft, first when he was national security advisor to Ford, and then when he repeated in that role for George H.W. Bush. So, I think the staff was already in total disarray even before the senior directors were fired, and then Waltz himself, and it's not at all clear that they had much chance to do what the NSC should do, which is consider options, look at them at the assistant secretary level, then look at them at the deputy secretary level, and then for the full cabinet, in order to then to give the president a recommendation.

And in particular, the Signal chat group, I think proves the point that it looked like a decision had been made, or maybe I should say better, Trump had said, "Hey, why don't we go bomb the Houthis in Yemen?" Which I'm fine with, I think it's long overdue. And what Waltz was doing was reacting to a decision already made. It's so disorganized that as the transcript of the chat group shows, the Vice President of the United States is still dissenting from the President's decision, saying he may not understand how this message will be received in Europe, you know, it's a good thing he's got J.D. Vance around to advise him of European public opinion. It shows a process in disarray, and ironically, it's Stephen Miller, who's mostly concerned with immigration, who weighs in and says the President's made a decision to get them back focused on doing what the President decided. And while the outcome substantively to me was correct, it betrays the decision-making process that does not bode well for the future. It looks like very little prior consideration, and a lot of scrambling around after a meeting, where Trump maybe preempted the discussion and now people are just trying to catch up.

BILL KRISTOL:

A few things that struck me, this is inside baseball for some of the individual participants, but I think with you here, why not discuss inside baseball? People I think will be interested. A, I was struck, the Vice President, J.D. Vance, was sort of participating as a peer with cabinet secretaries, admittedly, a national security advisor, Deputy Chief of Staff Stephen Miller, who actually sort of contradicts Vance... I don't know what it was like when you were there, when Mike Pence was the vice president, but in my day, many, many years ago, as Dan Quayle's chief of staff, he would not have participated—and we didn't have Signal then, or any email or anything—but he would not have participated, it would've been inappropriate, I think, it would've been thought inappropriate to participate as a peer with even the most senior staff. And private at a meeting at the National Security Council of the Cabinet, that's another story, but anything a little more public, which staff have eyes on, the vice president would want to retain his options, I think keep them to himself.

I was struck by that, I was very struck by Stephen Miller, and I'm curious, you worked with him, so I'm very curious to know what you think of that. He's the deputy chief of staff, director

of Homeland Security for the White House. He seems to have participated in the National Security Council meeting again as a peer of the Secretary of State and so forth, and in fact corrects the vice president as to his memory of what the president had decided. So, those two in particular, Miller and the vice president, and then while we're just on the individuals, Witkoff, who I think also is on the Signal chain, actually, the special envoy at every place, I guess, how does that work? Who is he reporting to?

JOHN BOLTON:

Right. Well, on Witkoff, it's sort of "Shadow-Secretary-of-State Witkoff." I think it was an untenable position for Marco Rubio to have this guy, who knows nothing about Russia, Ukraine, Iran, nuclear weapons, or much else, being the negotiator, apparently taking instructions directly from Trump in two critical areas like that, and I have deep worries about what might ensue, what has ensued already in dragging out the Iran situation and maybe getting suckered into a negotiation that gives Iran time. And on the Ukraine-Russia front being suckered by Vladimir Putin again and again to think maybe he's interested in a ceasefire when, manifestly, he's not.

I do agree that Vance's role seemed different from other vice presidents. They each have their own take, but it's been critical in recent vice presidents that they have the last word for the president. Whatever happens in the cabinet, NSC-level meeting, when the president goes back to the Oval Office, the VP will have the last word. That's what Vice President Pence did in Trump's first term. He would often ask questions, I think quite knowingly to elicit information that he thought Trump needed to hear, but it was always done very discreetly. And Pence's behind-the-scenes role with Trump, I can assure you from my own personal experience, produced a lot of results that were beneficial for the country and not necessarily results I would have thought would have come out if Pence hadn't had that word.

I just think that Miller is... He's been mentioned by Trump himself as a potential National Security Advisor. This really is inside baseball, but one thing that I did that the Biden administration continued was make it clear that the Homeland Security Advisor was subordinate to the National Security Advisor. We've got one homeland and one nation; they're the same thing and you can't have two people trying to do different things with it. And it worked out fine in the first Trump term. It worked out, I think, well in the Biden term. But here's Stephen Miller has recreated the disjunction.

Now, he may combine them if he gets to be National Security Advisor, but Miller, I think, who's a very bright guy, nobody should underestimate him, is I think seen inside this White House as an enforcer for Trump, that there's never a dissident thought, never a stray concern that maybe Trump's got something wrong and he would be an incredibly powerful figure in the bureaucracy as a whole if he did become National Security advisor.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah. My sense has been with Musk presumably withdrawing and the DOGE thing kind of perhaps somewhat having run its course or at least in its most visible way, that Russell Vought, who was the OMB Director, I think overlapped with you there and certainly at the end of the Trump administration while he was there. That's right, because of the Ukraine stuff, he was involved in trying to hold up that money. And then Miller, two extremely powerful White House aides, don't you think? And really very much in sync with each other, very much in a pretty radical view, I think we can say of executive power and what they want to do to the government and very much also not friendly to people with backgrounds that aren't... Have any Romney connection or God forbid, McCain connection or as you say, and also any kind of, I want to raise a few questions about whether we should go ahead with this. Is that your sense, that both Vought and Miller are not... But they're both able people, right?

JOHN BOLTON:

Yeah, they are. And Russ in particular, he spent four years thinking about what he wanted to do and is one of the... As did Steve Miller. And I think they are the shock and awe. People look at DOGE as the shock and awe, but they really are the shock and awe.

And in the case of what OMB has done, while I disagree with a lot of it, the combination of DOGE and OMB, there are some places that only shock and awe might work. Some aspects of the government... Look, Ronald Reagan wanted to abolish the Department of Education and as we know, he didn't make it, notwithstanding great people that he had at the education department, including people like Bill Bennett and you. So I'm still in favor of eliminating the education department.

I'm not in favor of eliminating AID and the Voice of America and the radios. These are, if done right, instruments of American power. And under Obama and Biden, as under Carter and Clinton, I don't think they were used right. So they needed reform undoubtedly. They didn't need destroying. And that's the kind of... Reminded me of the famous army briefer, an unfortunate young man who once said in Vietnam, "We had to destroy that village in order to save it." That's not the way it works. That's not the best way to approach it in those kinds of cases.

BILL KRISTOL:

So Vought and Miller are very powerful. Is your general sense, again, as you've talked to a lot of people who are in there and very close to it, people on the Hill, I want to get back to that in a minute. A sense that they are powerful also in terms of compared to the Attorney General and Secretary of Defense, traditionally very powerful figures in a cabinet. Is that your sense this time around?

JOHN BOLTON:

I think that we'll have to see now as Elon Musk's influence fades, and I don't think he's going to be doing a day or two a week at the White House. I think when somebody goes, they go, they may come back once a month or something, and I think that means the DOGE operation, to the extent it still exists hidden somewhere in the executive office of the president will also see its influence diminish. But that may be an opening for Russ Vought, that he will take over that job.

But overall, I think more and more decisions will be made in the White House and fewer decisions in the cabinet in the second Trump term than in recent presidencies. I think that's the clear message going ahead. Because I think people will be afraid to do something that might front run Trump and make a decision that he doesn't want to make. And I think that suits Trump just fine. He'd like to make all the decisions. "Well, what day should we file that case in the Southern District of Florida, Mr. President?" Well, this is Trump. He loves to be the center of attention on big things and small.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, I think it seems like centralization of power in the White House. And then within those big agencies, DOD and DOJ, which have very strong professional cultures, some people might say too strong at times and could use a little more political guidance, but obviously you've got the military DOD and a big civilian workforce and a pretty expert one. DOJ, you've got lawyers, know a ton about a lot of these areas.

My sense is the way they're... You've been in DOJ and very closely worked with the Defense Department. Again, how different is the Pam Bondi... You said in the conversation, I'll put it this way. In November, you thought that they'd be surprised when the attorneys in the Justice Department said, "Well, we can't really do that. It's not going to work very well. We can't argue this case." It feels to me like the Attorney General so far and a couple of her top deputies have been sort of running... Not being deterred by advice they might be getting from very senior people in the Justice Department. And Hegseth has got it and fired the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs and other general officers. And just curious what you think about those two departments.

JOHN BOLTON:

Well, I think in Justice, your description is accurate. And I think a number of very senior lawyers, particularly in the Civil Division, which I used to head, have resigned rather than carry out some of the Attorney General's ideas. I think there's going to be mass resignations in the Civil Rights Division given what we're hearing there.

So they have been able to get their way in the first three and a half months pretty much. There has not been as much pushback as I expected. But I would say this: There hadn't been that much litigation in the Supreme Court and if John Sauer, the Solicitor General, wants to come out of this administration with his legal reputation intact, he's not going to run roughshod through the Solicitor General's Office. The SG is called the "10th justice" from time to time for a reason, and that's because the Supreme Court expects more from the United States when it appears before them than other litigants.

That's also true in all other federal courts, and I certainly experienced it myself and with my lawyers in the civil division. You expect lawyers for private clients to say outlandish things and push the court and play games with it. You're not supposed to do that, but that's where it happens. What's happened in this administration is a steady erosion of the reputation of government lawyers as representing their client vigorously, but reminding everyone their client is the Constitution, their client is the rule of law for which the United States stands.

They're not Donald Trump's personal lawyers, and that's the way Pam Bondi and the political appointees, including particularly the acting US attorney for the District of Columbia have behaved. And the courts are pushing back on it. It's happened in the context of the immigration cases, but in several others where they know this is not the quality of work or the thoughtfulness that DOJ attorneys normally give before they file briefs or other papers with the courts. And that won't damage the Justice Department lawyers. It'll damage the administration.

So each time they go in and play fast and loose with the facts, as I think they've been doing in some of the immigration cases, it's just going to make them harder to prevail down the line. They are building up a reputation as not being the kinds of lawyers the courts have expected to see from all justice departments, Republican or Democratic. And it will take a while because the judiciary doesn't move in Trump time, it moves in its own time, but you can see it coming.

BILL KRISTOL:

You think the judges are signaling almost, or certainly are behaving in ways that show a certain suspicion about the argument some of the government attorneys are making in a way that wouldn't have been the case in the past?

JOHN BOLTON:

And some of the factual determinations that they're purporting to make. They're stretching arguments beyond credibility, and I do think they're playing fast and loose. Trump himself has said recently, of course, he's going to obey Supreme Court orders. He's trying to cover himself. But he's also clearly had an influence. People are afraid to look reasonable as the United States. Remember, this is not Donald Trump's law firm. It's the United States who their client is. They're afraid to behave the way they normally would. I think we're coming... I hope we're coming to the limit of how far you can play fast and loose with the courts.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, I was going to ask about that. Do you think the Trump administration will learn that lesson and sort of recalibrate a bit or will they try to plunge ahead and we'll get various showdowns and mini crises and not so mini crises?

JOHN BOLTON:

Well, I think we will have crises because I think some of them are just incapable of showing good sense. Again, this fellow who's the acting US attorney in the district has been sending letters to medical journals, questioning what they're writing about the various diseases. The argument being this could be fraud or corruption of some kind. This isn't going to go very far.

Trump's executive orders against the law firms where they have been challenged, where law firms haven't given in, have uniformly been struck down. And I think we'll see whether a number of the other executive orders he's trying to float don't find the same fate. Again, it looks like Trump is succeeding in a wide variety of areas. The litigation is slow to catch up because that's the way the courts operate, but I think it's justice itself that's going to find it harder and harder to do the kinds of things Trump pushed his lawyers in private practice to do.

BILL KRISTOL:

And you think the administration ultimately more or less yields to these court decisions?

JOHN BOLTON:

Well, if they don't, then we will have a constitutional crisis. There's no doubt about it. I think the courts have been pretty restrained, frankly, in the way they've approached this. There are plenty of places where you could see contempt citations being administered, but the courts are building a record because they know every time they do it, it will be appealed. There's going to be a lot more work in the courts of appeals and in the Supreme Court than in prior administrations. So these are well-experienced judges. They know their reputation is at stake too, the reputation of the independence of the judiciary is at stake.

There have been a few exceptions to this, but by and large, whichever way they come out, I think they know that the environment they're in, they're going to insist on compliance. Even Supreme Court decisions where there's been dissent on the right, as in the immigration case that made it up there, all nine said they expect due process, and they expect the court's order to be followed. So they're not naive about this.

BILL KRISTOL:

It sounds like you think the judicial guardrails could end up holding pretty well, are holding pretty well and are being manned pretty well, if that's the right term.

JOHN BOLTON:

Yeah, well, I'm optimistic about it... Because I think all other guardrails aside, if the courts buckle then we're in deep trouble and it may be irreparable, but I don't see that yet.

BILL KRISTOL:

What about the Defense Department? As I say, a place you've had a lot of experience with and I personally, I'll just preface it this way, I've met with two or three people, one or two civilian DOD career employees, a couple of military who've just been very concerned about should they stay? They don't agree with some of the things, they're worried about being asked to do things they don't want to do. They're worried about much deeper interventions to things like the military promotion procedures and so forth and politicizing of that. These are all... Many of them are not black and white. We want civilian control and military has its own you scratch my back, I scratch yours thing. Secretary of Defense and we respect, I think, have intervened at times in the Dick Cheney and Bob Gates and military promotions a bit to change the panel some to reward some new thinking or whatever, but it feels like Hegseth and his team want to go way beyond that. On the other end, there's also been a lot of disarray. So just give me your sense of DOD.

JOHN BOLTON:

Well, I think there is a lot of concern on the military side and the civilian side. I think that's right. I think Hegseth's performance has been so far below expectations that despite some initial moves like removing the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs and like taking pictures off the walls and things like that of former secretaries of defense, which is just silly and I think regarded as silly, there hasn't been as much disruption as there might've been. Now, there are things that are coming that are not good. I don't think the military parade on Donald Trump's birthday, which coincidentally is the anniversary of the formation of the Army is a good idea. It didn't happen in

the first term, although Trump talked about it a lot, and I think that was a good thing for the country. It will not be a good thing to have this parade.

And there are people in the Defense Department in policymaking positions in civilian ranks who are as bad as JD Vance and Tulsi Gabbard on a lot of our national security issues. So I think there's a lot to worry about on substantive policy terms. And we'll see if Marco Rubio in this joint position, even if only for six months, we'll see what he's able to do about that. I do think there is a possibility that there could be a division of labor between Hegseth and Steve Feinberg, the Deputy Secretary of State, he was the founder and CEO of Cerberus, a huge private equity firm, very successful. He had portfolio companies that worked in the defense area and in the intelligence area. He's known in the private equity world as a hands-on kind of guy. He could be, if he's allowed to be, play the kind of role that David Packard played for Mel Laird when Packard of Hewlett Packard was the deputy secretary and instituted reforms, many of which exist to this day.

I think if Steve Feinberg could clean up defense department procurement, you could speed up the delivery of weapons systems. You could save billions of dollars, all of which you could then plow back into the defense budget and there's an enormous amount of work to do. John Lehman who was Reagan's secretary of the Navy, said some years ago, "The way to solve the procurement problem at DOD is take all the armed procurement regulations, take all the board of contract appeals decisions, take all the court cases, put them in a big pile in the Pentagon parking lot and burn them." And I think that's basically about right. So if Feinberg can do that, if he can help make the personnel selection process more efficient in the military, if the service secretaries really do their jobs in an efficient way, if they bring some of what they've learned in business to help make the services more effective, that could all be good and let Hegseth do pushups in the morning with the troops and testify on Congress and things like that.

There's a lot to do over there and there may yet be a chance it can happen. Where I think the biggest failing is occurring, and it just happened this week, is in the White House where the defense budget, it looked to be over a trillion dollars request for the next fiscal year, but as Roger Wicker from Mississippi, the chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee pointed out it included 150 billion that he had added to Biden's budget just in the past few months. So that Trump's actual budget is a real cut in defense for the next fiscal year. We need to get the domestic budget down and the real defense budget up. So in this first effort by Trump, he's not achieved that.

BILL KRISTOL:

You were not a big fan of the nomination of Tulsi Gabbard for DNI. You think our... I mean, I guess, I'll ask an intelligence question and make it broader. How worried should we be, almost putting aside the substantive areas where people will debate Iran policy, obviously Ukraine policy and stuff? It is related to what I'm about to say, but still somewhat different. I mean, is the process going to function adequately for the next three and few quarter years? Could we think whatever one has thought about these other administrations, I think almost all the time we've thought, look, there's a massive professional staff and expertise and history that we're drawing on. It's an advantage having 80 years of us. It has some problems being a superpower for 80 years and certain things get baked in and routinized and so forth. But there are huge advantages to it too. And it means that things don't go totally haywire. I mean, how worried are you that three in a three quarter more years of this things could really go haywire?

JOHN BOLTON:

Well, I think the intelligence community is in real danger. I think this is one where we're really, in early days, I think shock and awe hasn't hit them yet... Except Laura Loomer, who finished off Mike Waltz also knocked out the head of the National Security Agency and the deputy head, a uniformed head civilian deputy for no good reason other than that she thought they were insufficiently loyal to Trump. This is striking deep in the heart of the Defense Department, the intelligence operation, NSI does electronic intelligence work and a huge range

of other activities and is a very professional operation, deploys billions of dollars of high technology. If people could really know what our spies were doing, they would be enormously proud of them and our scientists and technicians. And along comes Laura Loomer and two perfectly qualified people are simply knocked out. I mean, this is the kind of disruption that disrupts and doesn't do any good.

We're seeing job cuts proposed at the CIA. I will say I think Radcliffe has minimized the damage that it's about 1,200 over multi-year period, several hundred of whom already chose early retirement. So hopefully that won't go on too much further. But I think the real problem is Tulsi Gabbard, the Director of National Intelligence, who in one of her first acts as DNI, concluded again that Iran is not seeking nuclear weapons. Now, that's been a line of the intelligence community since 2007 when they concluded that Iran had given up the pursuit of nuclear weapons. That's been proven wrong by the subsequent history. There's no doubt, I think in anybody's mind, but particularly not in the mind of Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu, that that's exactly what Iran is doing.

But I think she took that and made sure that nobody reevaluated it. She made a policy decision. And I think her influence on intelligence over the next three and a half years could be extraordinarily damaging if it's not counteracted. I think a Mike Waltz could have taken Iran. I don't know whether Radcliffe will, I don't know who the new head of the National Security Agency or any of the other many agencies in the intelligence community are up for doing that. But I'm extremely worried about that.

BILL KRISTOL:

Well, that's worrisome. Economic policy intersects with obviously foreign policy, international economic policy. You've, I think, weighed in a bit on the tariffs, but that's a big foreign policy decision. So talk a little bit about that, both substantively and also how it was made and how it's being implemented.

JOHN BOLTON:

Well, tariffs were a priority for Trump in the first term. He didn't impose as many as he wanted to. And there are a lot of people who deserve credit for that by arguing with him, not simply saying, "Yes, sir," by saying, "Have you considered what the impact will be?" And Trump was unsure enough of himself that he didn't do as much as he wanted to. Now he is, I think, essentially unchecked inside the administration. This should be labeled for what it is. It's economic illiteracy, these tariffs. We know from history and from economic theory that these kinds of tariffs, broad sweeping across the board, high tariffs are going to have negative economic impact on the United States. Part of the problem is that Trump doesn't understand tariffs. He has said and including recently, that the foreigners will pay the tariffs. Well, the foreigners don't pay the tariffs.

The American importer pays the tariffs and the bulk of the cost is born by the American consumer in a hidden tax. How much the consumer bears it, how much the producer bears it as my basic economics course at Yale told me, depends on the elasticity of the supply and demand curve. So sitting here today, we don't know, but history's lesson is the bulk of it is born by the consumers. I think this is going to cause Trump enormous political problems here at home, most of which will be felt by the Republican Party in the 2026 election. And it's stunning to me that they haven't stood up en masse really, and said, "This is contrary to our basic economic theory in the Republican Party." Nor have they stood up and said what may be even more important constitutionally, "Tariffs are a tax. They are designated in the Constitution to be done by the legislative branch."

And although as part of its century plus long mistake of delegating too much authority to the executive branch, Congress has backed away from a lot of it. They have never backed away on the taxing power. And this should be a crucial moment for Congress to stand up and say, "We're just not going to accept this." An effort was made in the Senate to do that, and it failed. So if the Democrats get control of the House in '26, you can expect to see a massive assault on the tariffs, which probably won't succeed because Republicans will hold the Senate. But with

just a few switches in the Senate, that could change, but it will come after massive political damage to the Republican Party.

BILL KRISTOL:

You talked to a lot of these Republican members of the House and Senators. Do you think they're reaching closer to a point where they might break with Trump on something that they actually know quite a lot about and care about, and a lot of the constituents really care about such as tariffs? So do you think it just they could... I mean, you had said when we talked in November, you speculated about whether a couple of these nominees could run into trouble. They lost one or two or three Republican senators, but no more than that. What's your sense on tariffs or other issues, defense spending for that matter? Wicker has a strong statement objecting, as you said, to the bottom line that Trump has put up. But what do you think?

JOHN BOLTON:

Well, if they don't stand up on these issues, then we might as well stop talking about it. I mean, defense is a critical element of the Reagan Bush approach to the foreign affairs and governance. And frankly, so is the proper allocation of responsibility between the executive and the legislative branches. I think we saw some indication even before the Easter recess. Ted Cruz spoke out pretty strongly against the tariffs. There hasn't been so much chatter since they've come back from the Easter recess because they're consumed with their efforts to get reconciliation implemented and see if they can pass the budget. But I think this is one where we possibly will see more assertiveness. But I have to say, in addition to Congress, it's also puzzling to me that the business community hasn't stood up more against these tariffs. The President has used for the so-called reciprocal tariffs, the tariffs he announced on "Liberation Day," April the second, a statute Congress passed called the International Economic Emergency Powers Act.

I actually had some experience with that when I was at the Justice Department and the Reagan administration. It was still a relatively new statute at that point. But I can say from that and just other observation, there is no way the tariff in IEEPA intended to delegate the tariffing authority to the president the way he has. There are other sections of trade law that allow certain presidential action, section 232 of one act, for example, so-called National Security Exemption. But you have to go through a study process. Donald Trump doesn't study these things. Last night, he just announced a hundred percent tariff on foreign made movies. I mean, that is Trump at work, but—

BILL KRISTOL:

He put in a sentence about national security or the words national security in the tweet or whatever we call it these days—

JOHN BOLTON:

To get ready.

BILL KRISTOL:

... to try to cover, well, this is a national security exemption, but it is kind of unbelievable that he's just deciding on tariffs as if... As you say, it's literally specified in the constitution as legislative power.

JOHN BOLTON:

Yeah, no. And the other, there's a section 301, which allows for unfair trade practices, which is one of his basic rationales. But he didn't use either 232 or 301. He used IEEPA. Now, there are lawsuits pending challenging this, but what's stunning to me is they're brought by a small public interest law firm and others. I'm not questioning their lawyer's ability or their good faith or anything else, but where's American business on this? Why aren't they in court? The American Civil Liberties Union is challenging Trump across the board on his immigration policies.

They're in every court in the country. American business is just standing around watching the grass grow. People will say, "Well, look, individual companies are reluctant to stand up and file a lawsuit. They're worried Trump will come after them as he did against certain law firms."

Okay, I understand that. It's not a profound courage, but I understand it. But where's the Chamber of Commerce? Where's the Business Roundtable? Where are the hundreds of trade associations that are headquartered in Washington? Why aren't they in court? Why aren't they providing resources to the nominal plaintiffs? Why aren't they providing legal help? Why aren't they getting amicus briefs ready in the district courts where the suits are pending and the courts of appeals where they're going to go and ultimately the Supreme Court? Business ought to be pounding the table on this and all you hear is crickets.

BILL KRISTOL:

Do you think it changes?

JOHN BOLTON:

Well, I suspect that if one of these district courts says the president didn't have the authority under IEEPA," or it's something that's been going on for 40 years, doesn't actually constitute an emergency or any of the several grounds and there are more than one that they might decide on, then I think people might say, "Yeah, that was my position all along and we're glad to support," now to get in if they think to go on the winning side. But I'm just stunned at the inactivity. I don't know what they're hoping for, but if there had been an early challenge pushed through, you could be in a court of appeals somewhere now, and the unbelievable damage I'm afraid these tariffs are going to cause could have been mitigated for the American people, not just for the businesses themselves.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, it is striking. Not the only area where there's been a certain lack of willingness to stand up. Final maybe question I'll ask or subject at least, when you were in government, you were famously a critic of many international organizations. You also participated in them as ambassador of the UN, but you were a defender of the alliance, the core alliances that we were at the core of as part of our ability to maintain a sort of favorable international order, I think both in Europe with NATO and in Asia.

You know a million people from your years in government and out of government too, at think tanks who are at senior levels of governments and allied governments, particularly people on the center right side of the spectrum, I'd say. I know many fewer than you do, but I'm struck how genuinely puzzled and concerned and some of them even angry they are at the United States government. Again, I'm talking about people who've traditionally been very pro-American and I just wonder, A, do you hear that, and B, what do you make of it and is it fixable and where does that all go?

JOHN BOLTON:

Yeah. Well, I think your last point is probably the most serious thing of all of the potential consequences of what Trump is doing in the international arena. But to take the international organizations first, I have always distinguished, and I think it's the right thing to do conceptually, between collective defense alliances, which mankind has had since before human history began. We understand what that's about. That's what NATO is, that's what our bilateral alliances with South Korea and Japan and Australia are, and they remain critically important to us. It's been attributed to different people in history.

I think Winston Churchill was one person who is said to have said, "The only thing worse than having to go to war with allies is going to war without any allies." And that remains true even if Donald Trump doesn't understand it. I put the UN system and the multilateral development banks in a different category, and I've long favored pretty drastic changes there and I still do. I don't know what the Trump administration is in the process of doing or how they'll handle it, but a lot of these organizations really are excessively politicized. There are some that do good

work and we need to protect. I would say the International Atomic Energy Agency, the World Intellectual Property Organization. But a lot of the UN, as we think of the UN, that big 38-story building in New York, I once said, you could lose 10 stories and it wouldn't make any difference. You could probably lose more than that now.

And the multilateral development banks, to which the U.S. contributes tens of billions of dollars, I'm not sure why in today's world you need concessional flows from development banks, why it couldn't be handled in many places by commercial loans, which would have better discipline on the borrowing countries. But those are things that the Trump administration hasn't reached yet. We don't know whether there'll be a serious discussion about it.

But coming to the overall impact that this has had on people around the world, what Trump has done when you add all this together, when you add in his policies on Ukraine, when you look at the things he's said about NATO and our alliance structures and the things he's said about making Canada the 51st state, the way he's completely messed up the whole Greenland issue—which is of importance to American national security—threatening to invade Panama, saying he was going to take the Gaza Strip and turn it into the “Riviera of the Mediterranean.” He is burning through decades of effort to build up goodwill, trust, faith, reliance on America.

Our friends all over the world are saying, “You've taken leave of your senses.” I think some have overreacted and I think that's a mistake. It's Trump that's the problem. It's not the American people. Much of what Trump is doing, they didn't vote for in November and they don't like now. We'll get through Trump. There is a life after Trump. We will then try and repair the damage he's done. People shouldn't overreact to this. And the tariffs and all these many other things, it's not just the economic consequences for the U.S., it's the loss of what makes America exceptional. Again, very few people have talked about this. Ken Griffin has stood up and said, “Trump is damaging brand USA.” That's how a business guy would think about it, and it's an aspect of it.

But it's just the faith in us as a country that we've accumulated since 1945, you can just see it disappearing in front of your eyes and the likes of JD Vance and Donnie Trump, Jr. and the people around them who advise Trump simply don't see the disappearance of an enormous American asset. I just hope it's not as bad as it looks right now, and I hope we are able to repair it when Trump is gone. But this is purely gratuitous. It is a completely self-inflicted wound.

BILL KRISTOL:

That's really eloquent and powerful and a little chilling, honestly. I mean, I hope we can repair it also, but it's also how much damage he's done at 100 and whatever we're now at, 10 days or something, less than that, I guess. With 1,300 days or something left, I mean, one assumes that this was the shock and awe period and there's some version almost to the mean or some checking or some rethinking or some mugged-by-reality moments here where he comes back but can also spiral a little out of control, right? And that's what I guess alarms me the most. You just don't know how much strain... We're putting a lot of strain on allies and structures and arrangements that one hopes can... They've been around a long time, they can hold up some, but can they hold up throughout? That's the question, I suppose.

JOHN BOLTON:

Well, it is, and we're not acting alone here. If you're in Beijing looking at this, you're sitting around saying, “How are we going to take advantage of what Trump is doing on Taiwan, on the South China Sea, on a range of other issues?” And other rogue states like North Korea are thinking the same, which is why how Trump handles the Iranian nuclear weapons program could be so important. But what happens when the U.S. withdraws from the world is either anarchy arises or our adversaries take advantage of it. I mean, there's no rules-based international order out there. There is the United States and its allies whose power has kept things going for a long time. If we pull back, whoever moves into the vacuum isn't going to have our best interest at heart.

BILL KRISTOL:

No, and I think that last point's so important. It's not as if Xi Jinping is sitting around simply stroking his chin thinking, "Well, that's kind of interesting. It's kind of good actually. Look at... he's weakening." He is thinking that probably, but he's also thinking, that his massive team of advisors are thinking, "How do we now act to further the damage, to increase the damage to U.S. standing, economic, military, political, diplomatic?"

JOHN BOLTON:

Exactly. And as Vladimir Putin has shown, he's still a master manipulator of Trump. Xi Jinping hasn't made his play yet, but we may not be far from seeing that given the potential for a tariff war between the U.S. and China. And there are a lot of other players out there that are seeing this chaos, and they see chaos in the core of the administration too. They know that affects decision-making and increases the chance that they will do something they think we may not even notice, let alone respond to.

BILL KRISTOL:

Well, not heartening, but as you say, you also suggest we can make... There will be life after Trump and also things might reverse. And so we will see. This has really been extremely helpful for me at least, and I'm sure for our viewers and listeners and clarifying conversation about where we stand, a little over 100 days in in the wake of Mike Waltz's departure, but perhaps that departure is more of a symptom than a cause of anything much, as you've said. But John, thank you. Really, I appreciate you taking the time to join me, to join all of us today.

JOHN BOLTON:

No, glad to be with you again.

BILL KRISTOL:

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