

## **Starting Over: The Center-Right After Trump**

### **A Niskanen Center Conference on December 11, 2018**

#### *PANEL 1: LESSONS LEARNED*

**Moderator: Jerry Taylor**

**Panelists: Mona Charen, William Kristol, Jennifer Rubin, Peter Wehner**

**Jerry Taylor:** Well, thank you. While this conference is about looking forward, we're paradoxically going to start by looking back. There's a good reason for that. The better we're able to discern how Trumpism managed to win hearts and minds on the right, the better our ability to craft a politically compelling alternative. So, joining me this morning in front of this particular rear-view window are a group of guests who need very little introduction, I imagine, for this crowd. On my far right is Mona Charen, syndicated columnist. Before launching her column in 1987, she served in the Reagan administration and worked as a speechwriter for Jack Kemp. To my immediate right is Pete Wehner, senior fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center. You've probably read him in the *New York Times*. He writes widely on political, cultural, religious, and national security issues, and he served in the Reagan and both Bush administrations.

**Jerry Taylor:** To my left is Jennifer Rubin, who writes the "Right Turn" column, or "Right Turn" blog, for the *Washington Post*. Previously, she worked at *Commentary*, *PJ Media*, *Human Events*, and the *Weekly Standard*. And speaking of the *Weekly Standard*, to my far left is Bill Kristol, founder and editor-at-large of the *Weekly Standard*, where he served as editor for 21 years. He's a regular on ABC's "This Week" and on various television shows and commentary programs. He served as chief of staff to Secretary of Education Bill Bennett during the Reagan administration and chief of staff to Vice President Dan Quayle during the George Herbert Walker Bush administration. So, let's start it out by going right to the heart of the matter.

**Jerry Taylor:** I'd like to ask each of you your reflections on how deep this problem goes that is now causing dysfunction on the right. Did it begin with the Tea Party? Did the seeds of Trumpism go further back? Did they reach back to Newt Gingrich? Can we go all the way back to Barry Goldwater and the birth of the Reagan movement, if we were to be that ambitious? Mona, let's start with you.

**Mona Charen:** First of all, thank you all for having me, delighted to be here. There are very few gatherings in Washington, D.C. where I feel that I am not some bizarre third wheel [chuckle], not belonging, so this is pretty good. Look, there has been a tremendous amount of re-evaluation [on the right], which I actually don't think is an unhealthy thing; I wish there were more re-evaluation going on on the left. The rise of Trump has caused some conservatives to conclude that, because of what they see today, the entire history of the conservative movement was tainted. The scales have now fallen from their eyes and they see that the whole enterprise was corrupt going back all the way to 1964 and the Goldwater years, as Jerry mentioned, or going back to Reagan, or you name it. There's a tendency to think, "Well, perhaps the whole thing was wrong." Then, of course, as we know all too well, there are many conservatives who have said, "No, Donald Trump is just like Ronald Reagan." And they say, "They underestimated Reagan and they underestimated Trump." Well, there you go. What other evidence do you need that they're exactly the same?

**Mona Charen:** So my goal, just in a few brief moments this morning, will be to say that I do not believe that the rise of Trump is evidence that the conservative critique, or conservative solutions to what was going on in America over the last 50 years, was wrong. Let's name the issue... What was the left right about and the right wrong about as a matter of policy? Was it rent control, a larger role for the federal government in education, school choice, the whole-language approach to teaching reading versus phonics, the Cold War? The Cold War was an area where liberals really embarrassed themselves and it was a failure, not just an intellectual failure but a moral failure. During that time, I wrote a whole book about this called *Useful Idiots*... That is something I can return to later.

**Mona Charen:** But many on the left, and even in the mainstream of the Democratic Party, developed a rancid hatred for the United States itself. And then, just to check through, were they right about sexual ethics? Were they right about the importance of strong families? Were they right about abortion, regulation, markets? All of those things I think liberals were wrong about and conservatives were and remain right about. Okay, liberals were right about civil rights, but arguably they drank too deeply of the cup of moral superiority and they over-learned the lessons of Selma and Montgomery. They adopted a tactic of accusation and calumny where it didn't belong, and that turned out to be in way too many areas of American life.

**Mona Charen:** The left's creativity in recent years seems to have been confined to the production of new epithets — from “racist” and “sexist,” they've added “homophobe,” “heteronormative” and “transphobe,” along with “white privilege.” This is a substitute for argument and for persuasion. And as much as I was not crazy about liberals' principles, it was even more dismaying to see them throw them over the side for political expedience, which is what they did when Bill Clinton ran into trouble.

**Mona Charen:** I could go on and on. But the idea that conservatives and Republicans were racist all along... Some obviously were. Trump was able to tap into a certain amount of racial resentment and anger, I wouldn't deny that. But if we're looking at the sources of the rise of Trump and the rise of the rancorous politics that we have today — and extremism on the left too, represented by Jeremy Corbyn and Ocasio-Cortez and Bernie Sanders and so forth — you would have to say that identity politics is the core of what caused a backlash. It was only a matter of time, when the left was continually battering white people with identity politics claims, that white people were going to respond and say, “We're a group too, and we get to assert our interests as a group.”

**Mona Charen:** I have much more to say, and I don't want to dominate too much, but I would just say this to close for this part. Civilization is a fragile thing. And the key conservative insight, in my judgement, is that the rule of law and respect for tradition is what keeps us together. A polity like ours that attempts to knit together disparate peoples into one nation has always been slightly unnatural, and it's not easy. And that is what is in danger now. But it is wrong to say that the whole story was one of racism, sexism, and so forth that has been curdling on the right for 50 years.

**Jerry Taylor:** Let's move to Jen Rubin. So Jen, where do you think the right went wrong? Or is it that the Trumpist world is an anomalous phenomenon that is alien to the foundations of the conservative movement as we've known it, and it's some sort of external force? Or is it something that rose up from within it? And if so, when?

**Jennifer Rubin:** Thank you for having me. I share Mona's sense of isolation on an island of one at times. So it's nice to see some fellow islanders here. My own view is that there has always been a segment in American society — not always within the Republican Party — that has been what we think now of as nationalist or nativist. Whether it was the Dixiecrats, whether it was Father Coughlin, if you want to go back to the Depression... That has always existed. And within the Republican Party it has existed, but those people always lost. The extremes always lost. Pat Buchanan lost in the race against the sitting president. What happened is they reached a critical mass, and Trump did tap into something and then expand something. I do not think he would have had success had the Republican Party followed Mona's view of things and concentrated on the core values, the core human insights that modern conservatism brought. I think it's fair to say that [conservatism] has stultified, that a platform of small government really had very little constituency in America. An economic policy that was solely based on supply-side tax cuts was going to be a dead end at some point.

**Jennifer Rubin:** And there have been times of innovation, when people like Jerry, people like the reformicons, have tried to enliven [conservatism] using those principles. It's obviously conservatism to discard what doesn't work but to keep what does. I think the discarding was neglected. But [Republicans] really had not conceived, at least at the national level, a process of becoming a 21st century problem-solving sort of party. That contrasts, and has contrasted for a long time, with the states. We heard from Governor Hogan, and you go back to Mitch Daniels in Indiana... We've had a lot of really good reformist governors. You can go back to the origins of school choice, of welfare reform — these were driven by Republican governors out in the states. But at the national level, not so much.

**Jennifer Rubin:** I think there is always the possibility in democracy that a demagogue comes along. The surprise, perhaps, is that it was possible in America. And then the surprise, perhaps, was that there were so many people who were, if not amenable to a nativist and xenophobic message, at least not bothered by it. I think that was an endemic problem in the conservative movement.

**Jennifer Rubin:** Unlike Mona, I think there has been a blind spot on race — not racism, but a blind spot on race. It does go back to the civil rights movement, where [conservatives] were on the appalling wrong side of the issue. And so when it came along with Donald Trump, there was an effort first of all to seek some justification — because there had been a [liberal] identity politics that had gotten out of control. But there was also sort of a moral blind spot, because they didn't really care about what Donald Trump was ranting and raving about. How many times have we heard from conservatives, "It's just talk, it's just tweets"? I think that's wrong, because I think what he's actually doing is also bad.

**Jennifer Rubin:** But the notion that words don't matter, that ideas don't matter, that a founding creed doesn't matter, that suddenly we've become a white Christian nation as opposed to a nation built upon a creed of "All men are created equal" — that's the fault of a stultified and intellectually trapped right in America. I think that had the national Republican Party, which for all intents and purposes has been the receptacle of modern conservatism, done what happened at the state level, Donald Trump wouldn't have been necessary. He wouldn't have come along, he wouldn't have tapped into that.

**Jennifer Rubin:** And then, of course, we can't ignore what's happened since. And this is even more troubling. Because the degree to which so many of our colleagues and friends — or former

colleagues, former friends — have accepted this, have tried to rationalize this, have justified this, have applauded this, has really been intellectually, morally, and psychologically devastating to many of us who thought that the party was better than this, that the conservative movement was better than this. This is not what we believe in.

**Jennifer Rubin:** But the capacity for self-delusion, the desire for access and power, the moral bargaining that one undertakes to get a discrete issue or two, has perhaps surprised us. And as Bill and I and Mona clearly predicted, what has happened is the complete intellectual corruption of the right. And now we are in a far worse position than we were in 2015, before [Trump] came down those gold escalators at Trump Tower. So we're in a fine pickle right now.

**Jerry Taylor:** Pete, let me turn to you. If Max Boot were here — and unfortunately he can't be with us, he's in a speaking event on the other side of the country — but if he were here, he'd say, that's all well and good, but Joe McCarthy demonstrated the right was vulnerable to demagogue conspiratorial thinking. And then you had the rise of the John Birch Society, which was critically important in Barry Goldwater getting the nomination in 1964. And then George Wallace comes along and a lot of conservatives defected to George Wallace in the 1968 campaign. And then we had Nixon's Southern strategy, which locks up that end of the party and brings all the Dixiecrats and the segregationists into the GOP. And that's before we even get to Newt Gingrich. So it should be absolutely no surprise that Trump found an audience on the right, although that maybe surprised some of us. You've been involved in this world for an awful long time. What do you make of that more critical perspective?

**Peter Wehner:** Thanks, Jerry, for having me, for having us, and for holding the conference. I think there's something to [that view], but I think it's overstated. There's no question that those data points are relevant. Every party, every movement has its fringe elements. They manifest themselves in different ways. The question, the task, the challenge is for political leadership and political parties to marginalize those movements, to rise up when they assert themselves, and to keep them on the fringe. And I would say that for most of the history of the modern Republican Party — not entirely — that has happened. I think what's different about this moment is that those ugly strands and strains were not contained, and they finally found their voice, and their face, and their embodiment in Donald Trump.

**Peter Wehner:** So I wouldn't deny that those ugly elements existed, but I wouldn't assert that they were completely dominant. Life is complicated, and different moments bring different challenges and different individuals. What we do know is that something went badly off track and that Donald Trump tapped into something that certainly existed beyond what, at the time, I thought existed. It's important to remember that really what marked his entrance on the national political stage was a racist conspiracy theory about Barack Obama and his birth certificate. I actually wrote a piece in the *Wall Street Journal* in 2011, which was hard for me to place because people thought, "Why are you taking on Trump on this issue?" And I said, "A party has to stand up to someone like this and elements like this, otherwise they can spread." But I had no idea that it would spread to the degree that it has.

**Peter Wehner:** I think everybody here has to reassess their own sense of what the Republican Party was. I would certainly say now that the racial element was deeper than I thought. And I would not have imagined that somebody with the rank appeals to race, and the demagogic appeals, and the sheer dehumanization that Donald Trump represented would catch on. Yes, I've been as critical as anybody of the Republican Party and the leadership for not taking Trump on.

But I do think that the more serious malady is that the base of the party has gone. From my conversations with Republicans in office, I think that if left to their own devices, if they had more political courage, they would stand up to Donald Trump. I think really the reason they're not is that the base won't allow them.

**Peter Wehner:** I just want to say one other thing... As you look over the arc of the conservative movement, I think that Newt Gingrich was a much more pernicious figure, in retrospect, than people realized at the time. I think he embodied a kind of revolutionary, almost nihilistic temperament. I think a lot of people on the right rallied around him because he was our revolutionary, our nihilist, and he won in 1994. But there were a lot of elements to him that turned out to be a much more problematic. The last thing I want to say is that I think most of the people here really were products of the Reagan revolution, the Reagan era. Those were, for me anyway, formative political years. And one of the things that captured somebody like me was actually a line from Daniel Patrick Moynihan, of all people. Back in 1981, he wrote a piece for the *New York Times*, and he said, "Of a sudden, the GOP has become the party of ideas."

**Peter Wehner:** In that era, in that decade, what were the ideas and the books that we were talking about? *Losing Ground* by Charles Murray. *The Naked Public Square* by Richard John Neuhaus. *The Closing of the American Mind* by Allan Bloom. *Crime and Human Nature* by Jim Wilson and Dick Herrnstein. You had Antonin Scalia and the beginning of the Federalist Society with originalism. And there was an energy and people were drawn to the intellectual side of conservatism. That has been lost. And what has happened is it's become a party that's deeply anti-intellectual. And it's become almost a prideful disdain, I think, on the American right. I don't even refer to it as conservatism anymore. It's a disdain for governing. And it's almost as if the politics of theatrics has overtaken the politics of governing.

**Peter Wehner:** I do want to say one other thing. I know this is about looking back, but I'll throw it out there in any event. I do think that 2019, next year, is going to be the year that the Trump project comes crashing down around us, and I think an awful lot of people are going to come crashing down with him. And that I think will catalyze a fascinating period of which I have no idea what will happen. I think something is going to emerge out of the ruin and the ashes. I don't know what it's going to be, and I don't think anybody does, because so many things have been untethered. But Trump — and I was as early as anybody in my criticisms of Trump, and I could go on forever about how pernicious I think he is — he's not a political colossus. He is weaker than he ought to be, all things considered. He has taken over a party, which grieves me a lot, and it is a more Trumpified party now than it was a year ago. But I don't think this will last. And I think sometimes viruses create antibodies. Trump is a virus and the antibodies will emerge. But how that plays itself out is something that you all can answer later in this conference.

**Jerry Taylor:** I left Bill Kristol for last. Bill, you surfed all of this history in your time. You worked for the last moderate Republican president, George Herbert Walker Bush, or at least for his vice president. And then through the rest of your career, you've been heavily involved in the trajectory of the party — and memorably involved in cheerleading Sarah Palin in 2008 in that campaign. So you've seen the party evolve over this time, and I'm wondering... You have a unique perspective in maybe looking back and seeing where the inflection point occurred, if there was one. Or was it an accumulation of things that just, when aggregated over time, put the party on a path that no one had really anticipated?

**Bill Kristol:** I have a unique perspective as I was actually there for most of the terrible inflection points of the conservative movement over 30 or 40 years. [laughter] I guess maybe I was there for some of the good things too. I agree with pretty much almost everything that's been said. I have slight differences, probably we each have slight differences. My only differences with Mona, Jen, and Pete are where they happen to be in error, which is only a few places. [laughter] I of course will graciously not point them out.

**Bill Kristol:** I'd say movements are complicated things. They make errors, they undervalue certain things, they under-appreciate certain things. They just get certain things wrong. They fight some fights they're either wrong about or they misunderstand the historical moment and fight them in the wrong way. The Palin thing is an instance of that. I wouldn't be defensive for one minute about that, it's just you mentioned it. I wouldn't necessarily have brought it up; it's not featured high on my résumé. In 2008, I thought [Sarah Palin] would be a bold pick for John McCain. I wrote a column... I totally forgot about this. That was the year I wrote a weekly column in the *New York Times*, not one of the totally happier experiences in my life but nonetheless worth doing I suppose. And I wrote a column a week before McCain made the pick saying, "You should pick Joe Lieberman." That that would be the bold pick. It would be the governing coalition. It would really be a gamble — he'd have some problems at the convention — but he'd make it through.

**Bill Kristol:** They decided they couldn't go that way. I think Senator McCain expressed regret about that late in life, that he didn't do that. And then... I had no role in the campaign, but my vague view was, "You gotta gamble. Why not go with the young governor from Alaska," who was governing pretty well at the time and taking on the oil companies. And I say in my defense, the instinct I had was that you had to have a more populist flavor to establishment Republicanism. And that that flavor should be in the vice presidency, as a subordinate position to a very well-established candidate who frankly wasn't going to have his own views changed by whoever the VP nominee was. But that would be a way to incorporate a certain kind of populist discontent, much of which, after Iraq and after the 2007-08 financial crisis, was somewhat justified.

**Bill Kristol:** And so, the irony is, in a certain way... And who knows if history would have been different if they had won and if some of that populism would have been channeled through a McCain-Palin administration instead of festering outside, and then being in opposition to President Obama for eight years, and people going gradually crazier as they went into the opposition. History is full of these complicated inflection points. Movements are very complicated, as Pete and others have said.

**Bill Kristol:** I also very much agree with Mona, though. If you step back from the movement — which is really a nebulous and complicated thing, it's always going to have elements of kookiness and also elements of prejudice and elements of just being wrong about things — and just look at governance, I'm pretty comfortable defending American conservatism in the last half-century, when it was in power, as on the whole moving things in the right direction. On a couple of key issues, especially in foreign policy, it perhaps decisively pushed in the right direction.

**Bill Kristol:** And even on things [where conservatism] didn't do a great job, [conservatives were] pretty responsible stewards of the nation. I would say that about the Republican presidents we've had in the modern era. Nixon's a little more complicated, but even there, I would actually

make the case. And I would say that about, on the whole, the big policies that were advanced by Republican Congresses until quite recently, and Republican leadership in general until quite recently.

**Bill Kristol:** There have been demagogic elements on both sides — on the conservative side, very much so in McCarthy, the Birchers, Wallace and so forth. But ultimately no Republican nominee in the modern era, I would say, can fairly be denounced as a demagogue. I think most of those nominees, the ones who were elected, governed responsibly. And the ones who were defeated would have governed responsibly: Dole, Romney, McCain and so forth. That's the top of the party and the top of the movement. If you have a Senator McCarthy, say, who does some damage to the country in the three or four years that he's in the ascendancy, he's ultimately marginalized. The damage is real and some people are really hurt, and the broader anti-Communist cause (in this case) is somewhat damaged and the political culture is somewhat damaged. But it can be overcome.

**Bill Kristol:** Governors like George Wallace can be overcome. The Birch Society can be overcome. The reason Trump is unique is that he's president of the United States. He's the first real demagogue, the first person who really is not willing to put aside rabble-rousing and anxiety-increasing and bigotry-appealing as president. Other presidents have toyed with it, used it in their re-election campaigns a bit. They've had deputies, even vice-presidents occasionally, play in those waters. None of that's admirable, but that's kind of what a big democracy is going to look like. Having that person as president constantly making things worse — from the point of view of nativism, xenophobia, bigotry, contempt for the rule of law, contempt for democratic norms and so forth — that's really an unprecedented challenge. ... People say, "Oh, you're too obsessed with Trump" — it's a refrain from the movement. But this is an important historical effort. I think that's why some of us are so obsessed, in the very short term, with what happens with Trump, because that will ultimately change our retrospective view.

**Bill Kristol:** I'll just maybe close with this broader point. Politics isn't metaphysics. Historians will try to disassemble the different parts of the movement and make different parts of it as more or less contributing to this problem. But really it will be very different if this ends up being a parenthesis, or a moment where certain things have to be reconsidered and certain things have to be combated but ultimately we come out of it okay at the other end. Or this is an inflection point where it becomes the culmination or the end of a whole political movement, perhaps of a political party? And then it goes down this path in the future. That's a very different story. Not to sound too postmodern, but the truth, in some respect, really does depend on what happens. The truth going backwards, you could say, depends on what happens going forward. And I think that really is indeterminate, as Pete suggested.

**Bill Kristol:** We're less doomed than some people say in terms of both the party and the movement. The bigotry, the racism, a lot of these things were recessive genes within conservatism and within the Republican Party. It's perfectly fair to say they were always there and a lot of us didn't want to look too closely at them. A lot of us kind of just assumed they would recede further as things moved ahead, and you didn't need to have a big showdown with everyone who had supported George Wallace, or everyone who was indulging in things they shouldn't, because it was going to be overtaken by the progress of history. Recessive genes are recessive.

**Bill Kristol:** Perhaps that was too progressive a view of people, too hopeful and maybe a little bit of wishful thinking. But it was important that those genes were recessive and not dominant. That was not nothing, to keep those genes recessive. And to be fair, if you're going to be blamed for Joe McCarthy, you need to get credit for the Republicans who stood up to McCarthy. If you're going to be blamed for the Birchers, you need to take credit for Buckley expelling them. If you're going to be blamed for Wallace, you need to take credit for a lot of Republicans who really fought hard to prevent the party from going there, even within the early Reagan administration, fought hard.

**Bill Kristol:** You know, Reagan had slight tendencies... I think he was not personally at all bigoted, but he a certain kind of nostalgia for an older states'-rights conservatism. And those tendencies were fought pretty aggressively by a lot of people in the Reagan administration. This is kind of ancient history, but when Bill Bennett was nominated as education secretary in '85, we had a huge fight against a paleo-conservative defender of the Confederacy who didn't like Bennett. Bill was pretty conservative, but he had marched for civil rights in the '60s and very much supported Martin Luther King. He supported the Martin Luther King Day holiday, and he went out of his way as education secretary to visit the Martin Luther King Center on Martin Luther King Day. And that was not what some of the conservatives who had signed on to the Reagan project had been for.

**Bill Kristol:** And obviously in the '90s, I was quite involved in the fight against Buchanan. Buchanan ran a couple of times, that's true, and he got some votes, which showed, let's call it the nativist and bigoted underbelly of the party. But he was also pretty much expelled from the party. To George H. W. Bush's credit, he didn't try to keep Buchanan in. There were a lot of people telling him in '99, 2000, "You don't want him leaving the party and taking votes away from you. You should figure out a way to keep him in the fold." And he rejected that. And Dole famously in '96 told the bigots to leave the convention and so forth. And so there are instances of that as one goes forward.

**Bill Kristol:** The birther thing, as Pete mentioned... I remember Pete's piece. But it was so ridiculous in 2012. The Trump thing, maybe more of us should have denounced it, but to be fair it was no way part of mainstream Republicanism. Romney and Ryan had no interest in it. It would be interesting to go back and see what percentage of Republican candidates or incumbents in 2012 toyed with birtherism. There were some, I'm sure. We'd find some likely suspects. But surely not most.

**Bill Kristol:** I remember that one time when I was on Fox, sometime in 2012, I criticized Romney for accepting Trump's endorsement. You remember, there was some awkward ten-minute thing where Trump endorsed Romney in the primaries and Romney accepted it. It was pretty meaningless and everyone forgot about it three days later. And I don't recall or believe that Trump had any role at the convention or any role as a surrogate in the general election. It never even came up, I don't think. I still thought it was giving too much legitimacy to Trump even to stand on a stage with Romney for ten minutes. But it wasn't a huge deal, and I thought, "Okay, fine, that's what happens with candidates in campaigns." Maybe we should have been more severe at the time. But it just seemed so ridiculous and so far-fetched.

**Bill Kristol:** This would be an interesting empirical study... Maybe someone's done it. How much did Fox take the birther stuff seriously in 2011-12? I don't think very much. I think even



the prime-time shows at the time thought that was a bridge too far. They just thought it was kind of nuts, and really off in the fringes of the Internet. What happened between 2012 and 2016? I haven't really worked this out, but I do think the rapidity of the change in the character of conservatism, or in the relative strength of the different elements and forces within conservatism, changed pretty rapidly between 2012 and 2016.

**Bill Kristol:** There were elements there all along, in 1964 and 1980. You could find some in 1994 with Gingrich — I won't quarrel, but that was a bigger moment and maybe I misunderstood that some at the time. But somehow... In 2012, we at the *Weekly Standard* — and I don't think we were all alone in this — celebrated the pick of Paul Ryan as Romney's VP. That was the Republican Party of the future. We were bullish, and they probably didn't have as much public support as we thought. We had an excessively elevated view of the American public and their willingness to go for the limited government, entitlement-curbing type of platform. But having a slightly elevated view of the public is not the worst thing a political movement can have.

**Bill Kristol:** Anyway, Romney-Ryan did OK. They got 47 percent of the vote and the Republicans held the House, so it wasn't a disastrous ticket. But we thought that was the future. If you had said to any of us in 2012 that Paul Ryan, the spokesman for the future of the Republican Party (or so we thought at the time), would be retiring from politics at the end of 2018, and that Donald Trump, this buffoon who had advanced the birther conspiracy in 2012, would be president of the United States — that is just a startling, amazing turn. And I do think there are elements earlier on that contributed, but I think those four years, 2012 to 2016, are the ones which, if I were looking backward and engaged in historical research, I would really look at in a detailed attempt to figure out what happened.

**Jerry Taylor:** We've had our set-piece of opening remarks about how deep the toxins run in the Republican soil. I'd like to have a little bit more of an interactive conversation, so let me toss this out to begin with. Was there any inevitability to this at all? There's all this conversation about where it began, and this, that, and the other automatically put us on this path. But politics is contingent. If the Republican establishment had fought with more vigor, coordination, ambition, and aggression, and had the Koch network actually activated and gone to war — which they never quite did, though they were never particularly excited about the Trump campaign — things could have been entirely different.

**Jerry Taylor:** So, why didn't those events occur? There's a big, open question of why the Republican establishment and its strongest ally (or at least allied factor) in this race, the Koch network, didn't bear down. And how did they allow this? Because had they done so, we wouldn't be having this conversation. We'd probably be talking about Jeb Bush and the return of moderate Republicanism or something like that. But they didn't. So, I'm just curious... Or am I completely wrong? Is this, "Nah, that would never have happened, and politics isn't that contingent, and Trump was inevitable"?

**Jennifer Rubin:** No. Nothing is inevitable. People have agency. People have decision-making. I think that just as we didn't take birtherism seriously because it was so absurd, all of us were convinced at one point or another that Donald Trump couldn't possibly win the presidency. Why go to war against someone who's going to crash and burn? What we didn't realize was that he wasn't going to crash or burn. What we didn't appreciate, and I think we still don't fully appreciate, was how horrible a candidate Hillary Clinton was to lose that race, to run that race on

a status quo as opposed to a change platform, and to make the tactical errors that she did. Talk about history... If she had gotten off her duff and gone to Michigan a few more times, or to Wisconsin a few more times, we also wouldn't be sitting here. We would be in opposition to Hillary Clinton arguing that there's a better way forward. So yeah, I think it was not inevitable. And it was, in this case, at that juncture, a terrible political misjudgment by many people (me included) of the potency of his candidacy.

**Mona Charen:** I think we underestimate one big factor that did not come up in our initial conversations, and that is that in Barack Obama's term what you saw was an enormous explosion of horrifying terrorism coming out of the Middle East. And that led to an immigration crisis in Europe that had a huge psychological impact here. People being burned alive in cages, Americans being put on their knees and beheaded on video tape. And Barack Obama and the left responded to this by saying, "You know, you're a lot more likely to die in your bathtub than at the hands of a terrorist. And there are really more domestic terrorism deaths from white nationalists in the U.S. than there are from Middle Eastern terrorists. Fort Hood, that was workplace violence" — when Nidal Hasan was shouting "Allahu Akbar."

**Mona Charen:** I think the link between concern about immigration to this country — which is, after all, a bunch of Catholic people coming from Latin America and why do we need to be afraid of them? — is linked psychologically with what people were seeing every night on their TV about immigration into Europe and about the violence coming out of the Middle East. People conflated the two. And I think there was a failure on the part of the Democrats to take it seriously and to say that it was something that had to be dealt with. Hillary Clinton, in 2016, famously said, "Islam has no connection to terrorism." It insulted people's intelligence and it diminished their legitimate fears. Admittedly, many people exaggerated the threat to the United States, but I do think that that was part of it. I know, from members of my own family who voted for Trump and were not fans of Trump, that their reasoning was, "At least this is somebody who says, 'We have to close the borders until we figure out what the hell is going on.'" At that moment, he won over many waverers. And I think that's just a part of this puzzle we can't ignore.

**Peter Wehner:** I'd say a couple of things. It wasn't inevitable. Not many things in life are inevitable. Of course things could have taken a different turn. But I do think that the picture's darker than we would like to admit. First, if the establishment had gone after Trump, I have no confidence that would've hurt him. If any network had gone after him, it probably would have helped him. Because I think what that analysis misses is the deep, almost nihilistic anti-establishment sentiment within the Republican base. If you were to listen to, say, Rush Limbaugh and Mark Levin in the late 2000s, 2010, 2011, you would've noticed something was happening, which was that the traditional bifurcation of liberalism and conservatism had shifted to establishment and anti-establishment. And if you listened to a number of people at that time, you would have heard them as almost as critical of John Boehner and Mitch McConnell as they were of Obama. So that element was already percolating and coming up.

**Peter Wehner:** So the idea that if the establishment had stood up somehow and challenged Trump in 2016... I was never persuaded. If you go back and read the poll numbers... When [Trump] went down that escalator, within about four weeks he was number two behind Jeb Bush. He then went ahead in the late summer, and he never lost the lead in the public opinion polls. He was never really, truly in danger. And so this was not a hard nomination for him to win.

**Peter Wehner:** He understood something that the rest of us did not. Trump appealed to something that the rest of us thought would eliminate him. The birther issue showed that he understood something in 2011 and 2012 that the rest of us didn't. When he went down and made those comments about Mexicans being rapists and all, people said, "That's it, it's over." No, it strengthened him. When he made the McCain POW comments, remember the commentary? All the time it was, "This is it. This patriotic party cannot possibly rally around a guy who denigrates a former nominee who was a POW and a hero." Yeah, they could. He actually went up. Judge Curiel... He would just go over it again and again and again. So what it meant was that there was some kind of pathology that was going on that he understood, and he was able to tap into it.

**Peter Wehner:** I've always understood the argument — I disagreed with it — of those who said that in the Hillary Clinton-Trump election, they went with Trump because they felt like he would advance policies that were in the best interest of the country. I didn't agree with it, but I think it made sense. I think the real indictment is that in the GOP primary you had 16 candidates who provided pretty much any flavor of ice cream you wanted. If you wanted libertarian, you had Rand Paul. If you wanted the Ted Cruz version of conservatism, you had that. If you wanted a certain kind of Christian conservative, you had Rick Santorum or Mike Huckabee. If you wanted the reform element, you had Rubio or Bush or Kasich. They were there. They didn't run perfect campaigns, nobody ever does. But that was an impressive field. And the fact is that at every key juncture, at every important moment, the base of the party went with Donald Trump. And we just can't shake that. Again, I think it's an important and interesting question as to why it happened, but that is where we are.

**Bill Kristol:** Let me offer a word on that, though. I just think it's a little overstated. I mean, at every important moment when the race was competitive, Trump fell short of 50 percent of the vote. That's not an excuse for the Republican primary voters. But there's been a split in the party primaries for a long time between less well-educated and college-educated Republicans. It was split in 2012 with Romney versus Newt Gingrich. It was split in 2008 with Romney and McCain against Huckabee and others. 2016 was the first time the non-college voters defeated the college-educated voters, if you want to put it simply, because they all consolidated behind one candidate early and the college-educated split their votes.

**Bill Kristol:** And I want to say one thing on that... Trump's celebrity was a huge factor. Otherwise it would have been Pat Buchanan again. I mean, maybe some people were too complacent. I don't think I was complacent. I was extremely alarmed from the beginning. You can say, well, Trump had an insight that these techniques would work. But people just knew you shouldn't go there, because it's dangerous to go there because those techniques might work. Why were we so alarmed by Buchanan? Not because he was an offensive guy who wouldn't do any damage, but because he was an offensive guy who could do a lot of damage. Because we know from history that these kinds of demagoguery can do a lot of damage.

**Bill Kristol:** Maybe you could say in retrospect that [those 16 candidates] were irresponsible not to get out, some of them, or to consolidate. Maybe it wouldn't have worked anyway. The celebrity thing was just hugely helpful to Trump in the primary because it sort of took the edge off the danger. He's, like, a mainstream guy on national television — not on Fox, not on Breitbart, but on NBC for 14 years with this show that everyone went on. And he was a fun guest on Jay Leno. It's a little hard to suddenly say, "This guy is very dangerous," when everyone, normal voters, are thinking to themselves, "I don't know, he's like this bizarre, playboy/business celebrity from New York who's got a semi-reputable business, but everyone thinks he's kind of a

colorful guy. Is it that dangerous to vote for him?” We didn’t do a good job, maybe, of explaining the danger. But to be fair, the American system, being a nice system full of tolerance and willingness to tolerate a lot of idiocy, had tolerated him for a long time.

**Bill Kristol:** Two further points... I think Mona’s right. Leave aside how much Obama and the Democrats were to blame for the outbursts of terrorism in 2015 — Paris and San Bernardino. Just the fact of those attacks was very lucky for Trump. And Merkel’s decision to “let in” a million Syrian refugees... I’m not even criticizing it, but the photos of those immigrants, which were wildly overdramatized — that was huge.

**Bill Kristol:** If you talk to people that were close to the campaign — and Whit Ayres and Mike Murphy and others can talk about this later — the Muslim ban was the key moment where Trump went from a co-frontrunner at 19 percent in the polls to really, whoa, dominating the race. And everyone else said, correctly, “You can’t say that. You can say we should adjust our immigration standards and have tougher standards for some people coming from countries with a lot of terrorism. But you can’t say ‘Muslim ban.’ That’s contrary to the whole spirit of America. You can’t say ‘Mexican judge.’”

**Bill Kristol:** The conflating of the Mexican and Muslim situations, if I can put it that way, came from the images from Europe. If you ever flipped on Fox in 2015, which I wasn’t doing so much anymore but I did a little bit out of due diligence, it was astonishing the degree to which those pictures said, “That’s America if you don’t close the borders.” It was Cologne, the pictures of New Year’s Eve, and the rioting Syrian refugees.

**Bill Kristol:** Once again, these things can happen. People get alarmed. But if there’s not a super-prominent demagogue demagoguing about them, in a healthy democracy those issues tend to fade away. People get alarmed and then they adjust and decide, “I guess it’s not that terrible. Look around us. Is immigration really destroying America?” And you go back to a sort of normalcy. But with a president constantly demagoguing it, it’s hard to go back to normalcy.

**Bill Kristol:** Final point... It is an international phenomenon. I’ll just mention that since it would be silly not to. It’s disappointing that American exceptionalism didn’t succeed, in this case, in exempting us from the problems that everyone else has faced. That’s an interesting question of whether it could have, how much one can count on that. But obviously, it is an international phenomenon, which probably should make us hesitant before ascribing too much to a particular phenomenon of U.S. political history or intra-American conservatism political history.

**Jerry Taylor:** Well, I want to jump into this, but I know Pete wants to jump in and so...

**Peter Wehner:** Just two quick points. This is anecdotal... I don’t think I ever heard from one friend of mine, or one person I knew who was a Republican or a conservative, that they were supporting Trump because he was a celebrity. I will tell you what I heard a lot, and I’ve got emails to prove it, which is that he represented for them an anger and a grievance and a resentment. I heard versions of this: “McCain, Romney, and Bush are good people, honorable people, but way too genteel. We need a guy who’s going to bring a gun to a knife fight.” That is what appealed to them. It was precisely the man’s dehumanization and his cruelty that people saw in him and made them say, “Okay, that is a sign of strength, and we’re going to rally.”

**Peter Wehner:** I’m going to stick with my negative critique here, so let me take an area that I do know something about, which is the white evangelical Christian world. Trump won a plurality of those voters. He didn’t win a majority, but it was a field of 17. So in the early states, this guy

won of plurality of votes in New Hampshire and South Carolina. He won 42 percent in Alabama. Now, I'm telling you, if you had said, "These are the 16 other candidates and this is Donald Trump," and you gave their profiles, there shouldn't have been one white, evangelical Christian in a million that would have voted for Donald Trump ahead of these other people, if you took seriously any standard they had ever held in their entire political lives. I'm talking about fidelity to the pro-life cause... Trump would have been one hundredth out of 17. If you would have said personal life and morality, he wouldn't have qualified. If you would have said personal faith, he wouldn't have qualified. If you would have said fidelity to the conservative cause, he wouldn't have qualified.

**Peter Wehner:** So what was it about the man that would override every argument, every core belief, and lead them to vote for him in that field of Republicans? And the answer, in my estimation, is it was precisely the things that are most dangerous about him and most pernicious about him that rallied a lot of people to his side. They saw in him a kind of wrecking ball against the establishment, and they thought that this was a guy that would slash the throats, figuratively, of the Democrats. There was that much anger and that much rage going on. So I continue to think that the explanation for the rise of Trump, while it has various strands and explanations, is a tremendous indictment against the Republican Party and the base of the Republican Party.

**Jerry Taylor:** Let me try to challenge this conversation a bit, and whoever wants to jump in can. Look, if I wanted to make a counternarrative, I'd say that the Republican Party, after the Civil Rights Act, slowly became the segregationist Democratic party, right? The base of the Republican Party is in the South. It is where the Dixiecrat homeland was, and it now is in the GOP. And the Republican Party is now the national arm of that old, Southern segregationist Dixiecrat party. You can see it with Steve King, who is the congressman of my old district around Sioux City, Iowa — they've changed the numbers around, I think it's the fourth now — who has the Confederate Stars and Bars on his desk. From the state of Iowa! And if the Republican Party is going to become the party of the Dixiecrats and the 1960s Democratic South, is it too surprising that it has glommed onto a candidate who is a New York version of George Wallace? This man — the anti-intellectualism, the racial resentment, the anger, the conspiracy theories, the cruelty, the demagoguery — is that man in 1968. Wallace might have actually become president had he not been shot. But now we see it in the Republican Party. And if the Republican Party is going to become the Southern Democratic Party, should we be so surprised it couldn't be contained forever?

**Jennifer Rubin:** Well, I think the issue, at least for me, is that it had always been there, but it had never won. And it was a small segment of the party that we could rationalize: "Well, they never won a presidential race before. These people were always knocked out, and therefore they didn't have a critical mass, they didn't color the entire intellectual/political appearance of the party." And that changed. You can go back to the other candidates and the problems that they had, but it was there. And if I thought it was 5 percent or 10 percent of the party, it turned out to be 35 or 40. And pretty soon, the rest of them collapsed and there was a bandwagon effect. I think you raise a good question which someone else said earlier: Is the problem the base of the Republican Party? And if that's true, what party could you possibly be that would represent those people? And I made the joke — I think it was a joke, but maybe not — that we need a new base.

**Jennifer Rubin:** Because you are right. If it's going to be a Dixiecrat base, that's the candidate it's going to get. But I think there's obviously an alternative, and I think many of us have been making the case for a different kind of Republican Party. But yes, I think that core base came

with the civil rights movement, from 1964, when [Texas Sen. John] Tower came forward, that was the turning of the South from the Democrats to the Republicans. I think it's a disagreeable phenomenon, but also I think it's sort of factually inescapable.

**Mona Charen:** I'm not so sure. I'm not convinced. I think, obviously, there are elements within any party that are ugly and have all kinds of disagreeable traits. But look, in 2000, if Colin Powell had wanted to be a candidate in the Republican Party, I believe he stood a very good chance of winning and becoming the first African-American president. He was wildly popular in the Republican Party and also had a lot of strength in the Democratic Party. If you look at the way Republican voters in primaries did a dalliance year after year with the black conservatives who would show up, like Alan Keyes — there was a big boost of enthusiasm for him — or Herman “9-9-9” Cain... There was always somebody that had a little brief moment because Republicans were eager to show that they were interested.

**Mona Charen:** Look, people do like others that agree with them, so they're not going to embrace Jesse Jackson if they're Republicans. But they did really get enthusiastic about Clarence Thomas and about Colin Powell and about these various other black conservatives. Condoleezza Rice was practically carried on the shoulders of the convention when she gave that wonderful speech talking about how the Republican Party was the only party that would allow her father to vote in Birmingham and invited him to join them. It is just too simple to say that the Republicans have always been the Dixiecrats. It's not true.

**Jennifer Rubin:** No. That's not what we said.

**Mona Charen:** It was mixed.

**Jennifer Rubin:** We said that that segment of the Republican Party came from the Dixiecrats and that it now resides within the Republican Party. So the debate is whether it's 5 percent, 10 percent, or 40 percent of the party.

**Mona Charen:** Right.

**Jennifer Rubin:** But factually speaking, they did become Republicans.

**Mona Charen:** Okay, so let me make your point really briefly. And let me just say that there are aspects of things that Trump does that make my skin crawl, exactly because I think he is appealing to that element, however large it may be. His refusal to clearly denounce KKK support during the campaign, the whole fight with football players in the kneeling — that was clearly an attempt to appeal to a certain kind of racial resentment. I do think that's a part of it. What I'm not convinced of is how big it is. And there are so many other things going on at the same time. And I would just say that there are a lot of really well-meaning people in the Republican Party who are not racist but who might have voted for Trump for other reasons.

**Bill Kristol:** Just as a kind of analytical, empirical matter, the big change that elected Trump in the general election was the white working class outside the South. And the South had already moved pretty dramatically by 2012 or so.

**Jerry Taylor:** Governor Wallace got a lot of support in Wisconsin and Minnesota.

**Bill Kristol:** Correct.

**Jerry Taylor:** In the Democratic primaries, he polled heavily in white working-class districts.

**Bill Kristol:** But clearly, this began in Wisconsin.

**Mona Charen:** But many Obama voters voted for Trump.

**Bill Kristol:** Maybe 9 percent or something. But the Michigan, Wisconsin, Pennsylvania vote — I believe it is cultural, it's probably economically stagnation, and all of that. Some of us turned out not to catch on for whatever reason. But a lot of it was socio-cultural, some of it was race, a lot of it was immigration. Honestly, that's what the Trump people think. I think the racial dog whistles, they do that too and that's terrible, but the immigration issue... The polling shows pretty clearly that that was the main thing. And this is common with other countries as well.

**Mona Charen:** Yes.

**Bill Kristol:** Immigration does seem to be the perfect storm that brings together economic fears with social and cultural fears about the country: "It doesn't look the way it did when I was growing up, and it's going to look ever less like it did when I was growing up. And it's out of control in terms of the rule of law, and I don't really like those people much or trust them much to be part of a law-abiding, self-governing society." Add to that old-fashioned prejudice and bigotry. And it lends itself to demagogic appeals because "they" are often far away. Either they're not in the country yet or, if they are in the country, they often don't live in the places that most rebel against them. There's that fantastic data about how the most anti-immigrant sentiment is in you know, Sioux City, Iowa, which is in no danger of being overrun completely by immigrants.

**Bill Kristol:** A lot of things come together in the immigration issue. I wouldn't deny it. And then there's "the Southern captivity of the GOP" — Chris Caldwell wrote a piece with that title exactly 20 years ago in the Atlantic, a very good piece. And I think there's some truth to that. And then the actual Southern presidential candidates who ran in 2016 — this is one of these little footnote ironies of history — were an Indian-American former governor of Louisiana, a Cuban-American senator from Florida, a Cuban-American senator from Texas, and Rick Perry, who's just a sort of a generic grade of Texan — way more a Texan than a Southerner, honestly. I think those were probably the four from the old Confederacy who actually ran for the presidency. And then a billionaire from New York... This is not the first time in history that there are those who appeal to prejudices and resentments. I do think it is a complicated story.

**Bill Kristol:** Just on one point that Pete made earlier on "the party of ideas," the Moynihan comment... It is really important as we go forward... Some of us are focused a lot on the primary challenge to Trump, which I think is extremely important because at the end of the day there are a huge number of issues that have to be addressed on the social-cultural side, on the economic side. But if you don't remove Trump, it's very hard to address any of them responsibly, certainly from the right or the center-right. Maybe the liberals could address them responsibly; if they can, more power to them. But we also do need to have the continuation or revitalization of the right. And Jerry, you've been very involved in this with Niskanen, in a very impressive way, in rethinking a lot of issues. And some of that rethinking has to be pretty fundamental.

**Bill Kristol:** We were wrong about some things, out-of-date about some things. Some things we were mostly right about. It's a question of just convincing people... At some point I get slightly annoyed... "Elites were so out of touch, they didn't understand." There was some truth to that. But I don't know, am I supposed to criticize Jeb Bush for defending free trade? I mean, it really is the right policy. I think it really is good for the country. It really is dangerous to get into the

business of trade wars. Could you adjust a few things in the way you describe it? Sure. And could you give a couple of accommodations to some industries? Sure.

**Bill Kristol:** But at the end of the day, it's kind of important to defend free trade. It's kind of important to defend the international liberal order. It's kind of important not to play too much footsie with protectionism and isolationism and America First. And at some point, if you're an elite who believes in those things, you sort of have to defend them. Maybe you could defend them better. But it's not clear to me that the right answer is to pull too many punches in defending them. Sometimes that might work, but sometimes the goal line just keeps moving, and then the next person pulls more punches, and within about three years you've forgotten the core arguments that had produced a pretty prosperous and peaceful country, and a pretty peaceful world for the last 70 years with an awful lot of social and economic and cultural progress that we shouldn't just throw away. I think it is very important to not get so gloomy. We need to defend what really is worth defending.

**Jennifer Rubin:** I want to say a word about immigration. We have not had a real immigration crisis on the ground for a very long time. We have the lowest number of illegal immigrants right now that we've had in years. I don't want to say it's not an issue, but it is largely a rhetorical issue. Listen, there is a big segment of the Republican Party, a major magazine — not yours — that for decades has been dedicated on this issue about immigration. I don't want to say there's no issue there, but it has been wildly exaggerated. To say that we have an immigration policy that's gotten worse, that we have a crime epidemic because of illegal immigrants, is factually wrong.

**Bill Kristol:** I will give you that. But we do have the highest number of foreign-born people living in the country in a century. I'm not against that, incidentally. I actually think it's good for the country. But it's going to put strains on people socially and culturally.

**Jennifer Rubin:** Now, a related issue is that we're seeing "The End of White Christian America," to use the title of the great work by Robert P. Jones, and white Christian Americans (that is, Protestants) have become a minority in the country, and that is responsible for a lot of this unease. I think there is a modicum of truth in that. But that's not strictly speaking immigration, that's the falling-away of religion and the diversification of America. And if you're going to defend the Republican Party against the charge that they're just anti-diversity, you can make the case that what's driving the unrest is not immigration but religious fears.

**Jennifer Rubin:** But I think that if there was a mistake on immigration, it was in not taking on those people who have been demagoguing this issue for decades. George W. Bush, to his credit, was the last Republican who really tried to stand up to these people. He said, "Listen, we do have a law and order problem, but the solution is to make a comprehensive immigration reform." And the proof of the pudding is that the people who are most on their high horse about immigration come from states with practically no immigrants. We're not talking about Texas, where Hispanic-Americans are really very well integrated and many vote for Republican senators, members of Congress, and presidents like the Bushes. It's not California, which has now become completely integrated. If physical immigration and its ramifications were really the issue, it would be in the states that really have felt the burden. I would fathom a guess that there are not 1,000 illegal immigrants in the state of Iowa, but this is what motivates Steve King. And so I have to come back to the view that this is a point of demagoguery, and shame on many of us. I've been trying, but with very little success, to explain reality, and there's a reality out there.



**Jerry Taylor:** But actually, the interesting thing is the dairy farms in that part of Iowa are pretty heavily staffed by illegal aliens. And anyone there will tell you that if Steve King had his way, he'd shut down the whole economy of that particular congressional district. But they'd vote for King anyway. We have 15 minutes left and I want to put one last question out there for you. It might be an uncomfortable one, but I think it's an interesting one. There was a time, not that long ago, when all of you, plus people like Ross Douthat and Andrew Sullivan, had the commanding heights of the world of conservative public intellectualism. Today that's not the case. You have all been displaced by talk radio personalities, and performance artists on Fox, and demagogues...

**Jennifer Rubin:** Displaced? [chuckle] Displaced?

**Jerry Taylor:** If we were to measure influence on the GOP and the right, I think it's fair (unfortunately) to say that these actors have far more influence. The base looks to them, not so much to you. And that hasn't really happened on the left. Now, on the left, there is still the *New York Times* editorial page, which commands a lot of respect. You go to *Vox*, and there are powerful spokespeople there. So it's not as if elites in the world of public intellectuals have been displaced across the board. But they have been put aside on the right. Why did that happen? Because it wasn't always that way. Bill Buckley and George Will, whatever their shortcomings might have been, were serious people who entertained ideas. And the right is not particularly interested in that now. Now they're interested in anger and resentment and owning the libs and conspiracies. How did that happen? And is it possible for that to be reversed?

**Jennifer Rubin:** Well, intellectuals don't do very well in a nativist, know-nothing party. So I think the very things that we've been talking about have forced many of us out of the popular sphere of what remains of the party. I would hope that perhaps we have a somewhat broader influence on the general public, if that's any salvation. But I think that because the party turned nativist and populist, it's not going to accept public intellectuals in the same way it did, and that's one of my grave concerns. Not for me — I do fine — but for a party that now is unmoored to facts and reality and objective truth and all the rest of it.

**Bill Kristol:** I would say that it's probably exaggerated how influential people like Bill Buckley were. And they never felt they were that influential. There was a brief shining moment when the Bill Buckley conservatives came together with the neo-conservatives and with Reagan, and Jeanne Kirkpatrick joined the Republican Party, and the neo-conservatives joined the Goldwater-Reagan conservatives. I guess that would be the way to put it. And we all in that period, at least the three of us here who served in government, came to Washington to serve in the Reagan administration. There was that brief moment when everyone thought, "party of ideas." Buckley, Reagan, Irving Kristol, younger people too. That pretty quickly went away. And honestly, most of us probably have supported... Maybe not Pete, he was a Bush person. But most of us have supported people who didn't win the nomination most of the time in the Republican Party — in my case, from Kemp to McCain to others. So I'm not sure, honestly, how much power there was.

**Bill Kristol:** Obviously the culture has changed, the media has changed, all of that I wouldn't deny. I think Pete's point about talk radio is very interesting and its influence, which I think has faded now, probably was greater compared to other forms of media. A lot of things contributed to making ideas less central to our discourse. I don't know that that's inevitable for the future. I do think the rethinking needs to be, as I said earlier, open-minded and fundamental. And one of the things that cheers me up, incidentally... We were talking about Max Boot and the debates among the anti-Trump conservatives about the questions you've been raising, Jerry, but also,

going forward, Oren Cass versus Mike Strain. Do we want targeted ways to help workers or should we depend on economic growth? And I've changed my mind a little bit on that, actually. That's a legitimate debate among conservatives and moderates and intelligent liberals. And I think that's very healthy.

**Bill Kristol:** One of the things I'm asked is, "Is it a problem among you Never-Trumpers that you don't agree exactly on your analysis of what happened?" Pete and I have some slight disagreement about the relative weights of certain things — but that's good, not bad. It would be kind of crazy if we all agreed exactly on our analysis of the problem, or our analysis of the different weights to give to parts of the possible solution, or how to deal with the long term or the short term, or the electoral or the cultural. I'm actually heartened that the reaction against Trump hasn't led to a kind of foolish tribalism on our part, and that we can agree to disagree. And you've found this among your colleagues at Niskanen, I think, haven't you? Honestly, the quality of debate... I'm not so sure it is much lower than it was in the past.

**Jerry Taylor:** No, I think it's very elevated. I think one of the healthier things that Trumpism has done is that it has shifted the tectonic plates of complacency beneath conservatism (or at least some wings of the conservative movement) and caused a rethinking, a re-examination that maybe otherwise never would have occurred. And that ice is broken, and so now Max Boot can write about the realities of climate change in the *Washington Post*, which he never could have 10 years ago.

**Jerry Taylor:** I want to move it to this side, because you guys, I'm sure, want to jump in. But the story that I have in mind is from 2008, I think it was, or 2009... Believe it or not, I was writing for *National Review Online*. I was one of the cast of thousands who blogged at "The Corner." And at the time, Barack Obama was going after Rush Limbaugh, and conservatives said, "This is a disgrace. He's president of the United States, why is he picking on a talk radio host? This makes no sense, it's insane, it's political malfeasance." And I said, "No, I don't think it's political malfeasance at all. According to every poll I've seen, Rush Limbaugh is the face of the Republican Party circa 2009, so of course Obama is going to go after him. And Limbaugh's got a really low Q rating, so he's the right guy to go after if you're Barack Obama."

**Jerry Taylor:** And that's all I meant to say. No narrative about whether Rush Limbaugh was Moses on the Mount or a demon from hell. Just an observation. But it was interpreted as an attack on Rush Limbaugh, and that entire crowd of diverse NRO writers turned on me like a pack of wolves: "How dare you challenge Limbaugh? Who are you anyway?" It was startling. And it wasn't just the performance artists who were writing at NRO at the time, it was also a lot of their staff. I thought: Since when did *National Review* decide to bend the knee to a talk radio host? It's the talk radio host who's supposed to be promoting the ideas of *National Review*, not *National Review* promoting the ideas of the talk radio host. So something happened here, and it just didn't happen overnight.

**Mona Charen:** Part of it was money.

**Bill Kristol:** A traditional conservative motivation.

**Mona Charen:** It's a conservative value, Bill. [laughter] The conservative commentators were very interested in doing well. People were angling for Fox News hits and for being on the chat shows. And the way to do that was through fierce anger.

**Jerry Taylor:** I don't mean to hurt you on this, but how does that make you feel about capitalism if it's so corrupting?

**Mona Charen:** Oh, capitalism isn't perfect. It's just better than all the other alternatives.

**Jerry Taylor:** Two cheers for capitalism. [laughter]

**Mona Charen:** Two cheers, as Irving said. Look, the fact is that the market forces have a role here. People are attempting to advance their own careers.

**Peter Wehner:** Bill's quite right in the sense that ideas, intellectual ideas, never fully animate the base of a party. I think what is different now is that the American right has become actively anti-intellectual. That's a different mindset, and I think it's dangerous. I think there's almost a pride in going against ideas. Bill Galston is here, and he can talk about the elements of what populism does and the kind of emotions that it provokes. I'd say that there are some deeper currents that are going on. If you go back and read Neil Postman's book back in the 1980s, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, that was a pretty prescient book. I haven't read it for years, but as I recall he was arguing that television was corrupting politics and lowering our sights, lowering discourse. He couldn't have imagined that we would get to where we are. But I do think that there is an element now in which politics has become performance rather than the serious, hard, intricate work of governing.

**Peter Wehner:** I think a lot of people who were in those vineyards for 30 or 40 years got tired of making yet another argument from the conservative side of why cutting taxes was not a boon to the rich but was supposed to provoke economic growth. And there was something about Trump and the way that he carried himself that appealed to them. But what has really been lost, in my estimation, is an appreciation for what I would say are a troika of democratic virtues: moderation, civility, and compromise. And there is, as I was saying earlier, a kind of revolutionary, almost nihilistic temperament in the right that is different and much stronger than anything that I have experienced before.

**Peter Wehner:** That's why I don't think that the debates coming up in the next year or two or three are going to be central on public policy. And I say that as somebody who's been involved in the formation of policy for most of my life. What we're dealing with now is politics on some deeper and very, very important level, and that is the notion of norms and the rule of law and the importance of truth, as against this post-truth moment. And those are really the stakes, including certain qualities like decency and civility.

**Peter Wehner:** And I would just say that the corrupting effects of Donald Trump are profound. I mean, you are seeing it now. And I will tell you what will happen, which is that when the Mueller report comes forward and you get these Democratic investigations, and it becomes more and more clear that Donald Trump is corrupt from stem to stern, you're going to see some large part of the Republican Party defend him no matter what, come what may. You saw it even yesterday with Orrin Hatch, who said when he was asked about what are clearly the campaign finance crimes of Trump, "I don't care." Or if you listen now to conservative commentators, they refer to "process crimes" — those "process crimes" that really bothered them when Bill Clinton was president but no longer seem to bother them now that Donald Trump is president. So a large part of this party and this movement has hitched their wagon to Donald Trump, and he is going to pull them to places that they never should have gone.

**Peter Wehner:** The last point I want to make is that when I was growing up, one of the reasons that I was drawn to the Republican Party — Bill will remember this because we worked together — was this idea that the Republican Party were champions for truth, for objective truth. That was the argument Allan Bloom made against relativism. And now what you're saying is this person who is president — who's not only a liar, he is a pathological liar who is engaged not just in an attack on truth but in an attempt to annihilate the categories of truth and falsity — is one of the most popular presidents in the history of the modern Republican Party. And the base has decided that they are going to defend him, that they're going to be his sword and his shield. And so for me, as somebody who really cared about those concepts and still does, to see what has happened now is a tragedy. But you have to make the argument, whether it works or not and whether it's fashionable or not, that there are certain things that are worth defending, certain concepts that have to be stood for. And that's not just the role of public intellectuals.

**Jerry Taylor:** Unfortunately we're at our hard stop moment and...

**Mona Charen:** 30 seconds.

**Jerry Taylor:** These conversations can go a while. I'll give you 30 seconds...

**Mona Charen:** 30 seconds.

**Jerry Taylor:** Quick, Mona, 30 seconds.

**Mona Charen:** The point I was making is that ideas are not what sells right now. What sells for so many lonely people whose families are disintegrating, whose communities are not strong, who don't have religious faith, is that they need to have that sense of belonging. And unfortunately the way they get it is in the negative sense of hating the other. And so the arguments that people at *National Review* and the *Weekly Standard* and others make don't have that same emotional appeal of helping them to hate the other.

**Jerry Taylor:** I see a little bit of hate served up by some of those journals. But this queues up perfectly because our next panel is a natural point to move from beyond this, it's called "Beyond Polarization, Republicanism for Republicans." But before I turn it over to my colleague, Brink Lindsey, please join me in thanking the panel today.