



TRANSCRIPT:

July 11, 2008

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BILL MOYERS: Welcome to THE JOURNAL.

Thirty years ago, intrigued by the ascendancy of the new right in politics and of Ronald Reagan, I had many of the conservative leaders on this broadcast to argue and debate their philosophy of society and government. My hour with Ronald Reagan remains a favorite.

RONALD REAGAN: Government is attempting to do things today that properly belong either at a lower echelon of government or belong in the hands of the people. I believe that government exists to protect us from each other not to protect us from ourselves.

BILL MOYERS: I watched over the years as the movement increased its power, winning control of Congress in 1994 and then electing George W. Bush eight years ago.

GEORGE W. BUSH: I, George Walker Bush, do solemnly swear...

WILLIAM REHNQUIST: That I will faithfully execute the Office of President of the United States.

GEORGE W. BUSH: That I will faithfully execute the Office of President of the United States.

BILL MOYERS: Now, controlling the party, the Presidency, and Congress, conservatives had what historian Rick Perlstein describes as their first chance in the modern era to govern on their own terms - to prove themselves. They were euphoric. And they blew it.

On top of such bungled calamities as Iraq and Katrina...

GEORGE W. BUSH: Again I want to thank you all for- and Brownie you're doing a heck of a job.

BILL MOYERS: The conservative regime sent spending into the stratosphere... borrowed trillions from the future to pay for their agenda, and rewarded their wealthy base with huge tax cuts. Earmarks and contracts fattened lobbyists on K Street, which Newt Gingrich and Tom DeLay honed into a ruthless shakedown machine exploited by conservative movement stars like Grover Norquist, Ralph Reed, and Jack Abramoff.

JACK ABRAMOFF: Senator, I respectfully invoke the privileges previously stated.

SEN. KENT CONRAD: And I'd say to you Mr. Abramoff, shame on you.

BILL MOYERS: And after crusading for the impeachment of Bill Clinton, conservatives pushing family values turned out to be their own worst enemies. Some of their foot soldiers in politics and the religious right were outed for adultery, stalking Capitol Hill pages, soliciting sex. Believe it or not, just the other day Senator Larry Craig, who had been arrested for lewd conduct in a public bathroom, and



TALKBACK: THE BLOG

Our posts and your comments

OURPOSTS

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Facing Economic Troubles...

YOURCOMMENTS

"My dream for the American Dream is simply this: that we adhere to the vision of our founders. ..." - *David Thayer*

Senator David Vitter, a strict moralist revealed to have been a frequent customer of brothels, signed on as co-sponsors of the Republicans' Marriage Protection Amendment.

Meanwhile, over 50 top Administration officials have been implicated in scandals that cost them their jobs.

So the Bush Administration is ending as the conservative movement has run out gas. It's demoralized and in disarray.

REP TOM DAVIS: The Congressional Republicans are tied to President Bush. We're seen as an appendage to President Bush. And between an unpopular war, you take a look at the gas prices, the housing costs and everything, we are being tied to that.

BILL MOYERS: Unable to cope with stagnating wages, loss of jobs, gross inequality or the environmental crisis, 80 percent of the public says America is heading in the wrong direction. How did the right go so wrong?

This week, we're devoting the Journal to a conversation with two men a generation apart, but joined at the hip, so to speak, as conservatives deeply troubled that their movement has run aground.

Mickey Edwards signed up with the movement early on. He was part of the political forces that Barry Goldwater first mobilized in his campaign against President Lyndon Johnson in 1964. The conservative columnist, George Will, wrote that Goldwater lost 44 states but won the future with the movement he inspired.

Mickey Edwards became a leading figure in that movement. One of three founding trustees of the Heritage Foundation, he served 16 years in Congress and was elected National Chairman of the American Conservative Union. He's the author of this widely discussed book: RECLAIMING CONSERVATISM: HOW A GREAT AMERICAN POLITICAL MOVEMENT GOT LOST-AND HOW IT CAN FIND ITS WAY BACK.

If Mickey Edwards belongs to the founding generation of conservatives, Ross Douthat came of age in its floundering generation. He was born in 1979, one year before Ronald Reagan was elected President in 1980. He has written what many of his peers, including David Brooks, consider the political book of the year. This is it: GRAND NEW PARTY: HOW REPUBLICANS CAN WIN THE WORKING CLASS AND SAVE THE AMERICAN DREAM. It's co-authored with his colleague at ATLANTIC Magazine."

BILL MOYERS: Welcome to both of you.

ROSS DOUTHAT: Thanks.

MICKEY EDWARDS: Thank you.

BILL MOYERS: You know, Republicans have suffered only one sweeping defeat in the last 30 years. So why are you so upset?

MICKEY EDWARDS: Well, you know, Republicans used to believe in a certain set of basic principles about divided powers, limited government. What happened is with the Bush presidency, we have become the exact opposite of what we used to stand for. So we may win elections but we are now standing for, you know, an all-powerful presidency, you know, limits on public civil liberties. You know, so we've changed everything we believed in order to win elections.

ROSS DOUTHAT: In a sense, the GOP is a victim of its own success on a lot of fronts. Crime has fallen dramatically since the early 1990s. Marginal tax rates are vastly lower than they were when Ronald Reagan was running for President. The welfare system has been reformed. The Soviet Union obviously no longer exists. And so the GOP has sort of run out of things to say. Yeah, they've only lost one election but, I mean, I think if you look back to the Democratic Party in the early 1970s, I think a lot of Democrats after 1972 and then again after Reagan won in '80 would say, "Oh, well, we've only lost one election. We just need to, you know, regroup and come back." But, really, there were deeper structural problems facing the Democratic Party. And that's what the GOP's facing today.

MICKEY EDWARDS: One of the problems is that it's not just a matter of Republicans losing an election or losing some by elections. Our party is very unpopular. The President is very unpopular, but the party itself is very unpopular. So

you have a candidate, you know, like John McCain, well, whether you think he's a good candidate or a bad candidate, you know, running as a Republican nominee now means you have this giant weight around your neck.

BILL MOYERS: How did this movement which organized around Barry Goldwater, flowered with Ronald Reagan, and was consummated by George W. Bush, come to embody soaring spending, trillion dollar deficits, an unpopular war, political corruption, moral decay, and an imperial presidency? How did that happen?

ROSS DOUTHAT: That's a mouthful right there.

MICKEY EDWARDS: Yeah, right.

BILL MOYERS: But it's true, right? I mean, it that's what it does embody...

ROSS DOUTHAT: I mean...

BILL MOYERS: ...now.

MICKEY EDWARDS: Well, I, you know, one of the things I talk about in my book, Bill, as you know this but during the Gingrich years and you know...

BILL MOYERS: Newt Gingrich, Speaker of the House.

MICKEY EDWARDS: Right.

BILL MOYERS: '94 forward.

MICKEY EDWARDS: Right. Some of the things were good. But there was a change in the dynamic of Republicans in Congress to where hold winning power and holding power became the most important goal they had. It wasn't about what they had come there to stand for.

BILL MOYERS: Party loyalty over principle?

MICKEY EDWARDS: Party loyalty or loyalty to a person. In, you know, because what happens is instead of the President becoming, you know, the head of a separate branch of government, you know, he's not the head of government. He's the head of a separate branch of government. Well, all of a sudden, you don't look at him that way. You look at him as your team captain. So instead of keeping a check on him, what you do is you find a way to rally around him and help him.

BILL MOYERS: And you said Newt Gingrich...

MICKEY EDWARDS: You know...

BILL MOYERS: ...actually made the Republicans in Congress the handmaiden of the executive.

MICKEY EDWARDS: Pretty much.

ROSS DOUTHAT: What's interesting about Gingrich is, in the short run, he was trying to change that. He was really the only figure on Capitol Hill in the last few decades who's tried to really shift the center of political gravity in Washington back to Congress.

The problem is, though that the means he ended up using to do it, the only way he could do it, was by trying to rally the GOP around him and make it a much more partisan, more like a parliamentary party, really, than a traditional you know, House of Representatives / Senate party in the United States. And as a result, once the control of the White House flipped, once the GOP held all three branches, you did have this mentality that Mickey's describing where it was, you know, Republicans in Congress were just on the same team as George W. Bush. And they were going along with what whatever he was going do.

I will say, though, you shouldn't underestimate the impact of 9/11. I think if you look back over our history, national traumas always produce overreactions. They always produce over-concentrations of executive power. They always produce power grabs

in Washington, you know?

And if you look at what George W. Bush has done on this front, whether it's, you know, the detainee policy as it relates to prisoners in Guantanamo Bay or wire tapping citizens and so on, some of it is an overreach. But it also pales in comparison to what happened, you know, during World War I. Woodrow Wilson was imprisoning his political enemies. FDR was rounding up Japanese Americans and interning them. And even when you were getting started in politics, you know, J. Edgar Hoover, you know, the FBI-

BILL MOYERS: Oh, yeah, Lyndon Johnson

ROSS DOUTHAT: I mean, Lyndon Johnson

BILL MOYERS: ...after '67 became, you know, paranoid. He called his critics "nervous Nellies" and turned a lot of surveillance loose on them.

ROSS DOUTHAT: Yeah, so there is this long-term trend towards an imperial presidency. It is troubling. But I'm hopeful that some of it is just a temporary post-9/11 reaction.

MICKEY EDWARDS: Justice Kennedy said, you know, in the Guantanamo case, you know, the Constitution is not something to be set aside when it's convenient.

And we have this tendency to do it. Every year as we do things like this, we lose a little more of our system of separated powers and checks and balances. And I'm not as sanguine as you are about the fact that we can go back to what the constitutional system was, which is how we protect our liberties.

ROSS DOUTHAT: But the challenge for conservatism, though, as a governing philosophy, is that it's precisely that it's a theory of limited government that's operating in a society and in a framework that was built by liberals. We have the New Deal. We have at least parts of the Great Society have endured to the present day. And this has always been the challenge for conservatives - that is, how do you govern as a party that's critical to the welfare state when most Americans want you to run the welfare state?

And that's why the most successful conservative reforms for the last 30 years, look at welfare reform, haven't been about abolishing government. They've been taking about taking programs that liberals built and reforming them. The problem is when you run out of things to do on that front. And I think that's one of the deeper problems of the Bush Administration that you know, Bush came to power in the late 1990s as a reaction against a sort of overweening small government fervor on the right.

I think Bush had the right idea. I think that, you know, in the broadest sense, compassionate conservatism and the whole idea of a conservatism that wasn't just about cutting Medicare and cutting Social Security, that was where the Republican Party had to go. The problem is he didn't, as it turned out, actually have that many good specific ideas for reforms he wanted to enact.

BILL MOYERS: If the most fundamental tenet of conservatism is small government, how do you explain the fact that-

MICKEY EDWARDS: Well, first of all, you know, I don't think the rationale of the conservatism is small government. It's limited government, but that doesn't necessarily mean small. It means that there are areas that you cannot take government into. There are there are areas where the rights of the people are paramount. So, you know, in the old system, you know, before America, you had rulers and their subjects, right?

And the rulers told their subjects what to do. And our idea was, you know, we're going to be citizens, not subjects. And we're going to tell the government what to do. And there are areas where the government's not permitted to go. But within those areas the government can act. It - nothing that says it has to be a tiny government if the people themselves are willing to pay the taxes and to support certain activities for the government and it's within the Constitution, that's fine.

BILL MOYERS: But you've been writing and talking as if Henry VIII was back in power, right?

MICKEY EDWARDS: How about George IV?

BILL MOYERS: No, I...

ROSS DOUTHAT: George the second.

BILL MOYERS: You've been very concerned about not just small government

MICKEY EDWARDS: Right, right.

BILL MOYERS: ...or limited government but about encroachments on personal liberty of a President who says the law is, in effect, what he says it is. And if he - - 1,100 signings, each one of them saying, "I may not respect this law that Congress has passed."

MICKEY EDWARDS: Which he doesn't have the authority to do, but he's doing it. The problem with the President, you know, this has been my problem it's not that it's signing statements. It's not the 1,100 signing statements saying, "I'll decide whether I'm going to obey that law or not." It's the designation of himself because he's head of the unitary executive, you know, saying that all of the members of all the agencies and departments, you know, cannot be told what to do by the Congress.

Or it's saying that Harriet Miers and Josh Bolten cannot be required to testify before Congress even about conversations that the President was not involved in. You know, it whether it's setting the rules at Guantanamo, when the rules for treatment of prisoners of war is to be governed by Congress, not by the President, under the Constitution. So it's not that there's one thing that he does, it's that it's a whole pattern of basically saying, "I'm the decider. You know, I'm the commander," or as Scalia put it, you know, the Commander-in-Chief of the nation, which I didn't know we had. That's not in the Constitution. But that's the problem. It's a whole big picture of overreaching.

ROSS DOUTHAT: But I want to get back to your point about the size of government, Bill, 'cause I think it's an interesting one. And it's something you hear a lot of complaints on the right about, you know, how has this happened? We came to power as a small government movement and yet government has grown over the past 30 years under Republican administrations. However, the economy has also grown enormously. And, in fact, if you look at the government as a percentage of GDP, it's actually it's only inched up slightly.

BILL MOYERS: But the economy grew faster under Bill Clinton and the Democrats than it has under George W. Bush.

ROSS DOUTHAT: It's true. But the thing about Clinton, and, I mean, Clinton was, in a sense, just as Nixon was, in theory, a conservative who often governed like a liberal. Clinton was a liberal who often governed like a conservative. He was the guy who signed welfare reform. He was the guy who said the era of big government is over.

And I think conservatives really didn't often recognize it at the time. And, you know, they decided it was more important to destroy him politically than to cooperate with him. And that ended up being a huge lost opportunity for the right.

BILL MOYERS: You just said something that really intrigues me, and I care what both of you say about it. You say the Republicans set out to destroy Bill Clinton, not try to cooperate with him. And back to the Gingrich 'cause, like Nixon, Gingrich came to power not to defeat his enemies but to demonize and destroy them. And something happened in that regime which made cooperation and collaboration impossible.

MICKEY EDWARDS: Yeah, if you had not-

BILL MOYERS: This has been concerns you.

MICKEY EDWARDS: It has. And if we had not gotten into party uber alles, I mean, if we hadn't done that, what should have happened when Bill Clinton said, you know, that we're making changes, the end of welfare as we know it or whatever, we should have declared victory. You know you know, our if our focus was on ideas and principles and a kind of governance then it shouldn't have made any difference whether it was a Democratic President or a Republican President

BILL MOYERS: Instead you tried to impeach the President.

MICKEY EDWARDS: Absolutely.

BILL MOYERS: You did impeach the President.

MICKEY EDWARDS: I mean, it was nutty. It was totally nuts.

ROSS DOUTHAT: I agree, but I want to, I do want to say, as a caveat, that there is an extent to which sort of I guess what I think Pat Buchanan famously termed positive polarization, right? Which was what Nixon was trying to do. You divide, you deliberately divide the country 'cause you assume you'll end up with the bigger half. That can be a poisonous force in American politics.

But it can also be the way that you get things done. And I think there's a tendency, especially among liberals after a long period of conservative dominance, to say, "Oh, well, you know, it's terrible how Nixon divided the country. It's terrible how Gingrich divided the country." FDR divided the country, too. And was in and-

BILL MOYERS: -of great wealth.

ROSS DOUTHAT: Exactly. I - they hate me and I welcome their hate, right? That's what he said.

BILL MOYERS: That's right.

ROSS DOUTHAT: And, you know-

MICKEY EDWARDS: -and Harry Truman.

ROSS DOUTHAT: And oh, well, Harry Truman don't get me started.

BILL MOYERS: Ross, you write that a party ideologically committed to a small government may be ill equipped to run a large one.

ROSS DOUTHAT: Yes. And I think that's one of the lessons of the Bush years. I think the Bush Administration came into power with an idea that they were going to be a center right party that reformed the welfare state rather than abolishing it and sort of steered a middle course between, you know, the small government purists on the right and liberals.

The problem is, I think, because conservatives are naturally hostile or skeptical of government power, conservatives often don't think deeply enough about what they're actually going to do with government when they actually take power. And that's how you end up, I think, with a lot of the problems in the Bush years where you have people unqualified to run federal agencies being appointed. You have bills getting written up that are really good in theory but then you look at the details and they don't actually work.

So I think, you know, the challenge for conservatives is to basically prove that liberal argument wrong. Liberals say, "Well, because conservatives are fans of limited government, you can't trust conservatives to run the government we have." And conservatives need to prove them wrong, and they haven't.

BILL MOYERS: But how did conservatives come so far in one direction that we ended up with the Congress and the President trying to force Terry Schiavo's husband to keep her alive against his and apparently her will? I mean, where do you draw the line on government if not there?

MICKEY EDWARDS: It's not a matter of small government or big government, it's areas that are not the government's business. And having the federal government step in to try to overrule doctors, you know, and the husband of a patient or the example I use in my book, in Oregon, where the voters twice, overwhelmingly in referenda, said-

ROSS DOUTHAT: It wasn't it wasn't overwhelming.

MICKEY EDWARDS: Well, it was over-

ROSS DOUTHAT: It was in the low 50s.

MICKEY EDWARDS: It was, you know-

ROSS DOUTHAT: But it no, it was a majority. I agree.

MICKEY EDWARDS: And the voters of Oregon said that if a person is terminally ill, more than one doctor has confirmed this person is dying, this person, you know, cannot recover, and that person says, "I want to get doctors to give me medicines, not for them to administer it, but for me to administer it to myself so I don't have to be in great pain and agony and die in anguish, you know, over a long period of time," the voters said, "Yes, let them be given those medicines to help hasten their" and conservatives stepped in and said, "No, no, no." They said, "Our position is that we're the government. We will tell you how to live, and we're going to tell you how to die." And I you know, that was a complete repudiation of everything that those of us who started this modern conservative movement believe in.

ROSS DOUTHAT: I agree, this is a real problem for conservatives. You start out with the principle of federalism and certain powers are left to the state. But then when you get control of the federal government, the temptation is to use that power. That being-

BILL MOYERS: Now, what were they using it for, Ross?

ROSS DOUTHAT: They were using it well, they were using it to promote, I guess you could say, conservative ideas about legislation about the end of life in actually in both cases.

BILL MOYERS: Coming from the religious right or from political right?

ROSS DOUTHAT: Well, coming from I mean, I don't think you can completely separate the two. And I, but I think that, you know, American politics and this isn't just true of the right. Religion has been a force in American politics going back to the 19th century, going back to William Jennings Bryant, going back to the civil rights movement. I think there is an idea among liberals and some conservatives that, you know, religious participation in politics, using religious arguments is somehow illegitimate, you know, that the separation of church and state means that you can't invoke religious arguments in public.

And I think that that's just not true to American political history. Now, it's true that you can't, if you only make religious arguments for a given position, if you say, "Abortion is wrong because the Bible tells me so. Assisted suicide is wrong because only God has the right to take a life," I don't think you're actually going to make much headway in American politics because we are a religiously pluralistic society. But that doesn't mean that there aren't reasonable arguments.

You know, I mean, Mickey just made a very eloquent case for allowing assist suicide. It's very eloquent, and I think it's persuasive in certain respects. But there is a case to be made that, you know, in most of the cases where you allow assisted suicide, you're talking about people whose suicidal thoughts are, frankly, a, you know, a species of depression, illnesses that are treatable. They're, you know, they aren't getting sufficient pain medication. It sets up openings to abuses by doctors, abuses by relatives, and so on. It and, you know, the same goes with Terry Schiavo.

BILL MOYERS: But do you agree with what happened then when Congress brought when conservatives-

ROSS DOUTHAT: No.

BILL MOYERS: -brought the issue to Congress, the President-

ROSS DOUTHAT: No, I don't.

BILL MOYERS: -flew back from Austin to Washington just to sign-

ROSS DOUTHAT: No, because it's, no, it violates-

BILL MOYERS: But why? Why don't you agree?

ROSS DOUTHAT: Because it's a violation of federalism. Because-

BILL MOYERS: Of federalism?

ROSS DOUTHAT: Yeah, because there are certain issues, especially those that kind of, you know, legal system that has to be left to the states. And that this is, and here I agree with Mickey, this is a crucial conservative principle. If you look at the initial issue that sparked the rise of the religious right, it was Roe versus Wade. Now, what did Roe versus Wade do? It didn't, it took the right to make abortion laws away from legislatures, away from the states, and said, "No, there's a right in the constitution. You can't legislate about it."

And the conservative challenge to Roe versus Wade if Roe v. Wade were overturned tomorrow, and I think this is something a lot of Americans don't understand, abortion wouldn't become illegal. All it would mean is that states and governments, you know, have the power or don't have the power to vote on it.

BILL MOYERS: You-

ROSS DOUTHAT: And that's the conservative principle. That's where the anti-abortion movement comes from. And that's what it was founded on. The danger is, you know, then you take over the federal government and you want to, you know, you want to use it to pursue your end.

MICKEY EDWARDS: Two quick points.

BILL MOYERS: Yeah, sure.

MICKEY EDWARDS: I trace the Republican National Convention platforms from the Goldwater years to '04. And one of the things conservatives used to insist on in the platform, in the national platform, was separation of church and state. That we were the ones who insisted on it.

ROSS DOUTHAT: The separation of church and state, yes. The separation of religion and politics? I'm not so sure.

BILL MOYERS: Are you arguing for the separation of religion and politics?

MICKEY EDWARDS: No, no. But I'm arguing for a separation of making law in order to put your religious belief, you know, as the official-

ROSS DOUTHAT: But isn't that the separation of religion and politics?

MICKEY EDWARDS: No, no.

ROSS DOUTHAT: You're saying that people shouldn't vote based on their religious convictions, that law should be bracketed from often what are people's deepest convictions about life and death, you know-

MICKEY EDWARDS: We are a very religious people. Tocqueville found that long ago. We the American people tend to be religious. But we live within a secular governmental structure.

BILL MOYERS: Sure. Religious people, secular government.

MICKEY EDWARDS: Yeah, so I'm, you know, I'm all in favor of religious people actively advocating for a point of view and arguing strongly, you know, for example, in Oregon, when there was a vote on whether or not, you know, vote against it, you know? But that's where the distinction comes-

BILL MOYERS: Let me explore this a little bit. Ross talked about how religion in the past has been invoked in the political arena.

But when Martin Luther King called on all of us to this higher morality that he was talking about the Democrats then didn't say, "Well, we're the party of God." And there is no question but that the Republican Party in the last 25 years has presented itself as the party of God.

ROSS DOUTHAT: It's true that the Democrats at that moment didn't say, "We're the party of God." But actually if you look back through American history, there are lots of moments when prominent figures, Democrats and Republicans alike, have said things along those lines. You look at Theodore Roosevelt's famous speech. He says, "We stand at Armageddon and we battle for the Lord." Now, but I agree with you, Bill.

I think that that kind of conflation of God's aims with the interest of a single political party is a real problem. I guess I just think it's more a problem for that party than for American democracy. When I hear Tom DeLay saying, "God's on our side."

I think, well, this means the Republican Party's in trouble. It means that it's, you know, it's becoming self-righteous. It's alienating itself from the broad religious diversity of the American people. I guess I just have a lot more you know, I'm not really worried about the separation of church and state being breached. I think that separation is actually pretty strong. We're too pluralistic a society to ever have a theocracy. It's impossible to imagine.

BILL MOYERS: Is it conservative to deny what science tells us about global warming?

ROSS DOUTHAT: No. But this happens again and again with modern conservatism and it's a real problem. Conservatives assume that if you don't agree with the liberals on what we should do about global warming, let's say you oppose cap and trade regulations, right? Let's suppose say you oppose a carbon tax. You have to deny that global warming's happening at all.

And that's a mistake conservatives make time and time again. And you see it on stem cell issue and so on. And I think, no, absolutely, there's nothing conservative about denying the scientific consensus on global warming. It doesn't mean, though, that conservatives should just leap to saying, "Oh, everything Al Gore says we ought to do about it is right."

BILL MOYERS: But, Mickey, you've written this has upset some of your long-time friends and colleagues. You've written that conservatives today would have us believe they are the voice of American values. In fact, they are not even the voice of conservative values. Now, who are you talking about?

MICKEY EDWARDS: Well, I well, partly I'm talking about the Tom DeLays. But, you know, when Americans come in and say that, you know, the political party in this case, our party comes in and says, "We're going to tell you when you can die and how and how you can die. And we're going to come in and tell you that we're going to do electronic wire tapping, you know of your conversations without a court warrant, despite the fact that the law says, you know that you're that a warrant is required." But let me use an example

BILL MOYERS: Sure.

MICKEY EDWARDS: Out of what Ross said.

ROSS DOUTHAT: Oh, now I'm in trouble.

MICKEY EDWARDS: Well, no, no. You're not in trouble. But you mentioned Roe v. Wade. And it doesn't - what I'm going to say has no bearing on whether you're for or against abortion or Roe v. Wade. But this was a case of not understanding conservative values. Judge Robert Bork, when he was appointed to or nominated for the Supreme Court opposed the Roe-

ROSS DOUTHAT: -late in the Reagan years.

BILL MOYERS: Yeah, late in the Reagan years, right.

MICKEY EDWARDS: He opposed Roe v. Wade, which a person can do, on the grounds that the Supreme Court had created a right of privacy which does not exist in the Constitution. And so I had breakfast with him with a small group. And I said, "Did you really say that?" And he said, "Yes." I said, "So tell me, Judge Bork, you believe that the only rights the American people have are those that are spelled out in the Constitution?" And he said, "Yes."

Well, you know, it's the exact opposite. We're born with our rights. And, you know,

the reason you have the Ninth and Tenth Amendments in the Bill of Rights and the reason so many patriots like Patrick Henry opposed, you know, the Bill of Rights was they said, "Some idiot's going to come along in the 20th century or 21st century and say, 'You know, unless it's spelled out in here, it's a right the American people don't have.'"

Well, Judge Bork was that idiot. And so that's when I when I say that is where we forget what our values are and we start thinking that, you know, we, only the government has all the rights and we only have those that you know, the government permits us to have, which is turns American government on its head.

ROSS DOUTHAT: All right. But in defense, in defense of Judge Bork there is a danger and this is a particular danger with our judicial branch because they have so much authority, in theory, to interpret the Constitution, that they can read rights that don't exist.

Now, whether there's a right to privacy, I think that, in some sense, there is in the Constitution, is a separate question from whether the right to privacy protects a right to abortion and whether those founders, who you're talking about, whether Patrick Henry, did Patrick Henry, did the or the people writing the Constitution, did they think that they were writing a document that protected the right to an abortion? It seems well, it seems moderately unlikely to me.

BILL MOYERS: So what is the core value that keeps both of you conservative?

ROSS DOUTHAT: You first.

MICKEY EDWARDS: Well, you know, I'll tell you this is maybe a little - I don't want to be pugilistic here but you know-

ROSS DOUTHAT: Go for it.

MICKEY EDWARDS: I, look, I believe that the conservative movement, that Barry Goldwater, you know, believed in, that Ronald Reagan came out of, the idea that we support a constitutional system of self-government, that protects the rights of the people, I think that is an incredibly important perspective on the relationship between government and the people. And I refuse to let people take it over and people who don't believe in any of those things. You know, I refuse to let a Tom DeLay or a Newt Gingrich or whatever, you know-

BILL MOYERS: But how did they take it over, Mickey?

MICKEY EDWARDS: -take it over. Well-

BILL MOYERS: With that strong history of the Goldwater and even the early Reagan movement.

MICKEY EDWARDS: It happened out of frustration because Democrats controlled the Congress. We keep saying we base everything based on who was President. But Congress, you know, has a lot to say about what we spend and what we don't spend. And we were in the minority for a very long time.

BILL MOYERS: Forty years.

MICKEY EDWARDS: And I would say, Bill, your party was pretty oppressive, would not let us, you know, offer amendments to bills.

And so what happened was conservatives finally reached a point of just so much anger about the way they were being cut out of the process, you know, that they came together putting their party loyalty and seeking party control first. You know, I blame the, you know, the Democrats for a lot of it. You know, they created the monster and then we kind of built on it.

BILL MOYERS: Yeah, so why do you remain a conservative? Because when I finished Grand New Party, I thought you could be writing speeches for Barack Obama. No, I'm serious.

ROSS DOUTHAT: Talking about...

BILL MOYERS: Working people and-

ROSS DOUTHAT: Sure, there's a language in our book, I think, that you know, would sound pretty much right coming from Barack Obama's lips. I think what separates me from Barack Obama and what the way I define conservatism, I think it starts with what Mickey's talking about. But I guess I have a more expansive definition. I think of American conservatism as the attitude and habit in politics that's dedicated towards defending American exceptionalism in all its forms

BILL MOYERS: Explain that.

ROSS DOUTHAT: Against well, against the idea that we need to change America in pursuit of some abstract form of justice.

And I think that conservatism, broadly speaking, has been ranged against that tendency. And conservatism is for limited government, for a focus on the Constitution, and also for a defense of the particular habits and morays of American life. And I think this separates me from Mickey and makes me more of a social conservative than he is in the sense that I think government does have a role to play in conserving those morays and institutions, that America is a nation of, you know, one of the reasons we don't need the kind of government, strong central governments you have in Europe, is precisely because we've always been a nation of strong communities, of strong families, of, you know, churches play a much more enormous role in the social fabric of American life than they do in Europe. Voluntary organizations, the same way. Charitable giving, much higher in the United States than in Europe. And I think all of these tendencies, this is what American conservatism exists in an ideal form to defend.

If you go back to the 1970s and look at the things that conservatives wanted to do, they wanted a freer market. They wanted an end to, you know, the kind of wage and price controls that Nixon, imitating liberals, imposed. They wanted, you know, they wanted a reformed welfare system. They wanted a lower tax rate. Starting in the '70s and '80s they wanted a greater role for religion and public life. They wanted freer trade. A lot of what looks like conservative failure today is actually conservative success because so many conservative ideas have become the conventional wisdom.

BILL MOYERS: Granted. Then what happened the last eight years that brought you to this new-

ROSS DOUTHAT: It's the same thing that happened to the Democratic Party in the late '60s and early '70s. But it wasn't a moment you know, you were there. I'm sure that there were people-

BILL MOYERS: I saw the excesses.

ROSS DOUTHAT: And there were people then who saw those excesses and became conservatives. They were the neo-conservatives, right? And there are some conservatives today who will look at their movement foundering and say, "We need to jump ship. We need to go write speeches for Barack Obama." I'm not going to do that for the same reason you didn't jump ship in the '70s. I think there's enough goodness in American conservatism that it's worth staying and fighting for. And America needs two healthy political movements.

BILL MOYERS: Do we have two healthy parties today?

MICKEY EDWARDS: The Republican Party is not healthy. The Republican Party is not healthy at all. I mean, it's, I think, it's lost the confidence of the American people. It's lost the confidence of most Republicans. You know, it has, you know, you'd be amazed, Bill, how many people I talk to every day who have been lifelong Republicans who just can't support the party anymore. One of the things that is harmful to John McCain is that people aren't looking at John McCain, is he a good guy, is he a bad guy? He's got this Republican label. And I think our party is in quite serious trouble.

ROSS DOUTHAT: The Democrats are much healthier. And I think, you know, it's very likely that we're headed for a period of Democratic dominance, maybe four years.

BILL MOYERS: Well, which Democrats? I mean, because-

ROSS DOUTHAT: -maybe eight or more.

BILL MOYERS: Sure, there's a swelling of support for Obama and there was a huge support for Clinton. But many of the - I'm not a practicing Democrat. I don't defend the Democratic Party. In fact, I look at the party in Congress and realize that how beholden it is to wealthy interests, corporate interests. And I think, well, maybe there's fervor in the country but there seems to be ossification in Congress.

ROSS DOUTHAT: A deeper problem for the Democrats is they're going to probably sweep into power this November. They already swept into power in Congress. They're going to have a large majority. But, yeah, the question is what do they do with it? And when political movements take power, it usually helps to have a defined agenda.

This was why Ronald Reagan was so great. When Ronald Reagan was elected President in 1980, everybody knew it was a revolution because Reagan had been going around saying the same things for 15 years. People knew what he stood for. The challenge for the Democrats is, yeah, what they stand for now, there are some new ideas. There's some old ideas from back in the 1970s that they're rehabilitating. You know, and you watch the primary season, Barack Obama goes out and, you know, attacks free trade. And then, oh, it's the general election. It's time to pivot and be for free trade. And-

BILL MOYERS: Well, no, that's exactly right.

ROSS DOUTHAT: So, I mean, I think that this is the only good news for the Republicans right now in this moment of near Democratic triumph is that I don't think the Democrats are positioned to just establish a 20-year majority.

MICKEY EDWARDS: I think there's one other big problem for Democrats here. The Republican label is really hurting. And the Democratic label is very popular. But liberalism is not popular. You know, in these by-elections this year, you know, where Democrats were picking up seats that had been held a long time by Republicans, those were not liberal Democrats who were winning those seats. You know, the country is not turning to the left. It's just turning against the Republican

ROSS DOUTHAT: Although to be fair, that is often a sign, if you look back at the majority, the Democratic majority that existed when you came of age, it did depend on conservative Democrats. Sometimes having some ideological distinctions in your majority is a sign that you've got a really big majority.

BILL MOYERS: But here's let's get to the big issue in your book. The subtitle of your book is "How Republicans Can Win the Working Class and Save the American Dream" because my great concern is that ordinary working people in this country are having a real trouble making a living wage.

The paucity of jobs that pay living wages is, I think, the great moral as well as economic crisis in America today. And neither party has fully addressed that. Conservatives won under Nixon with the silent majority. Reagan won with the-

ROSS DOUTHAT: Reagan Democrats.

BILL MOYERS: -the working class that came over to the Republican Party. And George Bush won with the angry white man. But I don't see what any of those people have gotten from the conservative revolution because they're worse off today in real wages, adjusted for inflation, than they were 30 years ago when you came to power.

ROSS DOUTHAT: I'll push back on that argument a little bit. I think there are a lot of ways in which the working class is better off than they were in that era. I think if just looking at wages is misleading because one of the things that's happened thanks to free trade, thanks to policies that Republicans have championed, is prices, the cost of living, has fallen dramatically across the board for Americans.

If you look at the goods the poor and the working class buy versus the goods the rich buy, the goods that the poor and working class buy today are vastly cheaper than they used to be.

BILL MOYERS: You're not saying that workers face wage stagnation?

ROSS DOUTHAT: No, workers do face wage stagnation. But those wages do, in fact, buy more goods than they used to buy. There are ways in which the working class is better off. But, yes, on the big picture, I agree with you.

But Republicans need a tax policy that helps people investing in America's future in another way: People struggling to raise families. So we talk a lot about making the tax code more family friendly, making it easier for people to have two kids, to have three kids, to put those kids through school.

BILL MOYERS: Have working people benefited from these tax cuts to the rich? I say they haven't.

ROSS DOUTHAT: Well, they-

BILL MOYERS: We have greater gaps between rich and poor today than we did in 1929 or as big.

MICKEY EDWARDS: Well, and a part of that is that our focus has changed. We used to be a party that prided itself on being the party of small business. You know, we were for entrepreneurs, and we were for free enterprise. And more and more we seem to have become a party that idolizes big business, that supports big business in every way it can. Actually, if you go back to the Goldwater years, we were a party very much like what Ross is saying we need to become. You know, we were that. And we got away from it.

BILL MOYERS: It seems to me that both parties have contributed to the hollowing out of the working people of this country.

ROSS DOUTHAT: And this yeah, it's true. But I think one of the things, though, that's changed in America over the past 50 years is you now have a mass upper class in a way you didn't used to. It used to be you had the rich, you had the middle class, you had the working class, you had the poor. Now you have there's been an explosion of wealth for highly-educated Americans, Americans with college degrees but especially with post-grad degrees over the last 30 years.

And you see it, especially in big cities on the coast. You see it in New York. You see it in Washington. You see it in Boston. And what this has created is a real constituency both for the Republicans and for the Democrats for policies pitched to these voters. So, for instance, to take this is a kind of a narrow example, right? But look at college. Look at what Bill Clinton pushed, you know?

He would get up and give speeches about the need to make college affordable, right? And that's obviously a really important thing. But the way they went about making college affordable was by pushing for scholarships that went other upper income families because that's a big constituency that likes getting merit-based scholarships, that likes getting financial aid to help them out. But that isn't where the American public education system actually ought to be focused.

BILL MOYERS: So let me ask you both as conservatives. If capitalism, as it does, promotes inequality, shouldn't democracy try to strike a balance and promote more equality to keep that tension-

MICKEY EDWARDS: Well-

BILL MOYERS: -between them?

MICKEY EDWARDS: Capitalism, in theory, does not promote inequality.

BILL MOYERS: But in practice.

MICKEY EDWARDS: What capitalism promotes is that if you are going willing to invest your time and money into a particular service where you're providing a service, a benefit, a product that is useful, you're going to get a reward for it, you know, and that's going to cause you to do more. And you're going to create jobs and so forth. We have allowed the system to grow to where we it has nothing to do with free trade, you know? So we support people like Ivan Boesky and Boone Pickens and, you know, these predators, you know-

ROSS DOUTHAT: Or we support you know, the ethanol industry, the ethanol

subsidies for Iowa.

MICKEY EDWARDS: Right. Yeah, people who aren't producing goods or services. They're just producing money.

BILL MOYERS: Is that because there's too much money influencing politics? They buy the policies they want?

MICKEY EDWARDS: Well, you know, maybe some extent. But I you know, I, people on the other end of the political spectrum are also buying the policies they want,

BILL MOYERS: But working people don't have the capacity to buy the policies they want.

MICKEY EDWARDS: No, but you have you know, even within organized labor, organized labor started getting away from the idea of how do you worry about the guy on the assembly line, you know, to whole new areas of-

ROSS DOUTHAT: Well, or organized labor got to the point where it was worrying so much about the guy already on the assembly line who had the huge pensions and had the high wages that it didn't worry enough about the guy who couldn't get who couldn't get on the assembly line. I mean, I think that that's been the challenge, especially in the U.S. auto industry.

BILL MOYERS: Let me ask you about the debate on your side because some of your critics say you've gone soft.

MICKEY EDWARDS: Yeah, right.

BILL MOYERS: That your plans for reclaiming conservatism laid out in this book would take policy positions that John Edwards would love. You're against the war in Iraq and the Patriot Act. You would have the government protect abortion rights and the right of states to sanction gay marriage. You're suspicious of NAFTA and big business. And you're against the No Child Left Behind Act. In fact, of my colleagues asked me why isn't Mickey Edwards Obama's running mate? Because these are positions that would fit very comfortably in that side of the spectrum.

MICKEY EDWARDS: Those are positions that, for decades, conservatives believed, conservatives championed, you know? Keeping things out of the hands of the federal government, keeping things out of the hands of government generally, allowing people to make their own decisions, you know? I haven't moved I you know, I-

BILL MOYERS: You haven't moved?

MICKEY EDWARDS: I haven't moved, you know? I am where I was-

BILL MOYERS: You shall not be moved.

MICKEY EDWARDS: You know, when we started out as conservatives. And it's because I was a loyal Republican. I've been a loyal Republican all my life. But my loyalty to my party does not transcend my loyalty to the principles that got me into politics in the first place.

ROSS DOUTHAT: And there's a tendency I think in American politics to say, well, if you're not for George W. Bush, you must be for Barack Obama.

MICKEY EDWARDS: Absolutely.

ROSS DOUTHAT: And I think No Child Left Behind, right? You brought that up. That's a good example. Why do you oppose No Child Left Behind? I assume it's because you think the federal government shouldn't be messing around with state education systems. Why do liberals oppose No Child Left Behind? 'Cause it didn't spend enough money messing around with state education systems. So there's, you know, there's a huge diversity of political views I think that doesn't fall neatly into a "you're for Obama" or "you're for McCain" kind of camp.

MICKEY EDWARDS: There is a line here. You know, the people who are attacking me are post-Reagan people. I don't even know what they represent but it is not

conservatism. You know, but the-

BILL MOYERS: They call themselves conservatives.

MICKEY EDWARDS: Well, sure, they-

BILL MOYERS: Don't you think Rush Limbaugh considers himself the voice of conservatism? Don't you?

MICKEY EDWARDS: Well, yeah, I'm sure he considers himself the voice of everything but, look, the fact is the people who created the conservative movement, the people who were the Goldwater/Reagan people who wrote those platforms, that insisted that the District of Columbia have a vote in Congress, Arizona, the Planned Parenthood gives an annual Barry Goldwater award, you know, because we believe in free choice of people.

BILL MOYERS: Somewhere between you and Ross, the radicals took over, right?

MICKEY EDWARDS: Well, somewhere. Somewhere.

ROSS DOUTHAT: Well no, but let me well, I'm certainly not part of the Republican power structure right now. Mickey and I, I think, disagree on a lot of stuff and represent kind of different visions for the Republican Party. But I think Rush Limbaugh would pretty much hate us both.

MICKEY EDWARDS: Yeah.

ROSS DOUTHAT: So and that's, you know, that's a problem. I do think, though, there is a tendency, too, among conservatives to always sort of pine for the golden age. And I think that this is something that, you know, when Ronald Reagan took power, you know, after a couple of years in power, people were already saying, well, you know, he's betraying conservatism and-

MICKEY EDWARDS: Let Reagan be Reagan, right?

ROSS DOUTHAT: Let Reagan be Reagan. The revolution is always being betrayed.

MICKEY EDWARDS: Yeah, I'm not longing for a golden age. You know, I'm longing for adherence to the Constitution of the United States 'cause when we talk about American exceptionalism, that's what it is. It's not our wealth. It's not our military. What makes us exceptional is our form of self-government, you know, that keeps most of the major powers over whether to go to war, what our tax policies ought to be, how much we spend, keeps it in the hands of the people through their representatives.

BILL MOYERS: Is John McCain a conservative by your definition?

ROSS DOUTHAT: I believe in a, you know, a big tent for who is and who is not a conservative. I think it's fair to define Mickey as a conservative. I think it's fair to define Rush Limbaugh as a conservative. I think, you know, there's a lot of variety within the conservative family. And I think, you know, McCain falls into that camp, broadly speaking.

BILL MOYERS: What about you? You know him.

MICKEY EDWARDS: I yeah, I know him and I served with John in the House. And I think I agree with Ross that he is a conservative. But-

BILL MOYERS: Why is he having such a hard time-

MICKEY EDWARDS: Well, for one thing, because he is trapped, you know? He's this maverick. He's this straight talk guy who doesn't want to lose the Bush base and the, you know, there's only a few people who are still loyal to Bush, but he doesn't want to lose them. And so he goes back and forth. And you know, he said something the other day that I thought was the most un-conservative thing I could imagine. He criticized the Guantanamo habeas corpus decision saying it was one of the worst decisions ever.

And what was the decision? It said that the United States government cannot lock people up and hold them indefinitely without charges being brought and chance to defend themselves. Well, you know, so what is McCain supporting, you know? Star Chamber? I mean, you know, Henry VIII? You know? So-

ROSS DOUTHAT: Well, I think-

MICKEY EDWARDS: There I think he just kind of he lost it, you know? But I think generally overall I think John's a conservative on most things.

BILL MOYERS: "Grand New Party: How Republicans Can Win the Working Class and Save the American Dream." What's the one thing that Republicans could do to win over the stagnating working class?

ROSS DOUTHAT: I think the biggest thing Republicans could do to win them over is to marry the language of family values as being the pro-family party to an agenda that goes beyond abortion and gay marriage. I think that the Republican Party has the right position on the issue. But being a pro-family party, being on the side of the American family that especially the working-class family, has to go beyond that. It has to look at healthcare. It has to look at the tax code. It has to look at all these areas that affect the well being of American moms and dads and kids.

BILL MOYERS: Has to do the things that liberals have been talking about?

ROSS DOUTHAT: It has it doesn't have to do the things that liberals have been talking about, but it has to address the issues that liberals have been talking about in a conservative way. I think if you read our book, you won't find a lot of specific policy proposals that liberals embrace. This is why I'm not writing speeches for Barack Obama. He isn't going to sign up for the policy ideas that I support. But he is talking about the right issues.

BILL MOYERS: And, Mickey, "Reclaiming Conservatism." What's the most important thing conservatives can do to reclaim their philosophy?

MICKEY EDWARDS: You know, we have to start standing for principle. You know, so I think we need to go back to what kind of a government did we create? You know, I, you know, I came out of a very poor background, and I am very much you know, I agree totally with him you know, that we need to be addressing the concerns of the working class. I do believe that. But we have a system of government that keeps power in the hands of the people through their representatives. And we can't lose that. That's what we have to do. We have to stand for principle again instead of being a party that only stands for how can we defeat Democrats?

BILL MOYERS: Ross Douthat and Mickey Edwards, thank you both for being on the Journal.

MICKEY EDWARDS: Thank you, Bill.

ROSS DOUTHAT: Thanks, Bill.

BILL MOYERS: Before we go, some news about a brand new JOURNAL initiative you can explore on our [Web site](#).

As we've just been hearing, what keeps our nation vital is a continuing discussion of diverse and often conflicting ideas. But what holds us together is the belief that everyone should share in what we almost reflexively call "The American Dream." The ways in which that dream is imagined are as complex and often contradictory as America itself. Some see it as the acquisition of fortune and material success. Others see it as social or personal change or ways in which we can work to perfect the union or stand as an ideal for the rest of the world. Still others see the dream as a myth, perhaps even a nightmare. In this presidential election year, we've asked the men and women who have appeared on the Journal to share with us their vision for the future of The American Dream. [Here are some examples](#).

REV. SAMUEL RODRIGUEZ: The American Dream needs to be above all things, trans-generational. It needs to connect our fathers' legacy, their struggles, their hardships, their experiences, with our current generation.

GLENN C. LOURY: And that we would have the courage not only to criticize ourselves, but then to embrace the changes that we need to make in order for our

reality to comport more closely with our ideals.

ROSS DOUTHAT: The thing for America to do is to remain America. To remain what it's been since its founding - a nation of limited government, of strong families, of strong communities, independent and self-reliant.

ORLANDO PATTERSON: My vision of The American Dream is an America which is able to make available its enormous resources, the wealthiest, most profitable country in the world, to all its citizens.

PHIL DONAHUE: I'm afraid The American Dream is going to be out of the reach of most of us until we, the public, become brave enough to elect political leaders who will reach out instead of lash out.

SARAH CHAYES: If we don't rebuild our public action, based on an ethical foundation, it's over, The American Dream.

MARTHA NUSSBAUM: My vision would be of an America which we recognize that we each have a conscience, each of us is searching for the meaning of life - it's a very hard thing to do. And that we agree to respect one and other as equals, as we carry out that search.

ELLEN SPIRO: My American Dream is about freedom, which is about tearing down walls, not erecting them. And it's about freedom from fear. It's about possibility and hope.

MATT WELCH: And what's best going to help facilitate further this great American Dream, is the more the government stands back and let's this wonderful thing continue to happen.

MICKEY EDWARDS: We had to get to this point where the American people say, 'Wait a minute, what's America all about?' And let's not lose that.

NELL PAINTER: I would like us all to feel a stake in our society and our future.

MARIA ECHAVESTE: We have to reclaim the American Dream ...that Americans have to understand that they have to fight for the American Dream in order to make it a reality.

BILL MOYERS: You'll find many more ideas about The American Dream, and you can tell us your own, [on our blog at pbs.org](http://www.pbs.org).

That's it for the JOURNAL. See you next week. I'm Bill Moyers...

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