



Episode 1,308: Bill Kristol's Weekly Standard is No More

Guest: Paul Gottfried

WOODS: We're very rarely together on a happy occasion, but this is an exception as we anti-mourn the passing of *The Weekly Standard*. So you know, there'll be excuses for why it happened and this and that, and as we've already seen, people on the center left are mourning its passing and talking about how senseless it is that we should lose this magazine and it was a voice of sober and sane conservatism, which these are all damning words. These are the only words you need to hear about *The Weekly Standard*. But maybe, can we start off by having you say a little something about the founding of *The Weekly Standard* and what purpose it was supposed to serve?

GOTTFRIED: Well, it was founded I think 23 years ago, and for these 14 years, it was paid for by Rupert Murdoch, who was also subsidizing many other adjuncts of the neoconservative empire, including Fox News, *New York Post*, etc., etc. And as best as I can understand why it was founded -- and I'm not being cynical here; I'm trying to understand this as an objective scholar, if it's possible to be objective in these matters. I think it was simply given as a gift to a prince of the neoconservative royal blood, just as you know in the Renaissance period, I suppose Alexander Borgia gave his children Italian principalities or the evil French kings gave their offspring various pieces of land. And Bill Kristol was not being really gainfully employed at that time, so he was given this magazine. And I think one of its main functions was it became sort of a way of introducing people on Fox, *Meet the Press*, and elsewhere, that so-and-so contributes to *Weekly Standard*, by which you meant that so-and-so knows Bill Kristol, who is sort of an establishment player in Washington. I could never figure out why it was necessary to widen political debate in the United States, it was simply one more neoconservative publication or one more neoconservative voice among a multitude of well-financed neoconservative voices. And like you, I'm not surprised that it folded. What does surprise me is that a very costly magazine, whose editors were receiving large salaries from what I've heard, managed to survive for 23 years with very limited subscription.

WOODS: I was reading an article in *The Spectator*, the US version, comparing *National Review* with *The Weekly Standard*, and saying that first of all, there really was no clamor at the time for another *National Review*. This magazine, *The Weekly Standard*, did not arise from some groundswell of grassroots demand. There was no such thing. But further, another difference between them is that *National Review* had a model that was based around a fairly substantial donor base of small to moderate to some large donors, whereas *The Weekly Standard* was more like, *Here, you've got a super-rich guy. He's going to bankroll the magazine*. Now, how does that affect the magazine? Does it?

GOTTFRIED: My answer to that question is that, if you have multiple funders for a publication, which seems to be the case with *National Review*, you're obviously not as dependent on the wishes of an extremely rich and perhaps whimsical donor who may pull the plug on you whenever he decides he's not happy with the product that he's receiving. I think there's probably other differences, that the *National Review* has a long history of being the flagship conservative publication in United States going back to the 1950s, and for a long time, it was closely associated with Catholic conservatives. Buckley himself was a devout Catholic. Other members of the editorial board were Catholics. And they were strongly anti-communist, and they started off being a pro-McCarthy publication. Now, obviously the magazine by now is politically indistinguishable from *Weekly Standard*, but it does have a very different genealogy, and I think it has a different -- as I say, for people who read *National Review*, it does have a history of being at one time an authoritative traditional conservative magazine, something which I don't think that *Weekly Standard* had acquired.

WOODS: That's true. That's true. Now, at the same time, as *The Weekly Standard* drifted off into the sunset, we did get a lot of complimentary words about it. I mean, that's true of anything that dies, whether it's an ex-president or a magazine. But I was hearing things like, regardless of their foreign policy, you would occasionally read a very literate article by a thoughtful person in this magazine. And I have no doubt that that sort of material did creep in there from time to time. But in general, what would you say was the editorial line of *The Weekly Standard* if they could have been said to have one?

GOTTFRIED: Well, I think they had several editorial lines which operate simultaneously. One is extreme hawkishness in foreign policy, focused on two areas. One, Russia and generally Europe. And the purpose of this was to counteract the evil Russian empire and at the same time sort of preventing far-rightist groups from coming to power, particularly in the neoconservative bit low [00:07:13], which is Germany. The other of course, is Israel and maintaining, in quotation, "Israeli security." I think those were the main focuses of foreign policy, territorially or geopolitically. There also was a neoconservative light motif that kept creeping in, which was bringing democracy to the world. Now, I think this was much more subdued than was the case in, let's say, the rhetoric of Charles Krauthammer or the people funded by Irving Kristol back in the 1950s, but it was nonetheless there. And if you read most of the articles, the stuff on social and cultural questions, it was sort of pretty standard centrist, but also sort of establishment Republican. In fact, there was nothing very distinctive about the magazine that one could not find in *Commentary* or other neoconservative publications. But as I said, it sort of did enjoy a certain cachet, because the people who wrote for *Weekly Standard* were much more likely to appear on Fox News and even other channels, on network channels than, let's say, people writing for *The New York Post* or *Commentary* magazine.

WOODS: Bill Kristol's name has to come up in this conversation.

GOTTFRIED: Right.

WOODS: He moved not completely off the masthead. I think he was like an editor-at-large figure.

GOTTFRIED: Right.

WOODS: And they put -- was it Stephen Hayward? Who'd they put in this place? Do you remember?

GOTTFRIED: Stephen Hayes, who was on Fox News.

WOODS: Stephen Hayes, different person. Right, okay. But the thing is, you could obviously not really shed the name Bill Kristol from the image of the magazine.

GOTTFRIED: Right.

WOODS: And so what people are saying, and I think correctly, is that even as they moved into a post-Kristol world, well, first of all, if it really is the case that Kristol was listed as editor-at-large, nobody really knows what that means. Generally, it means you have no responsibilities whatsoever, but at the same time, that legacy, that lingering legacy of Kristol was an albatross around the magazine's neck, people say. But I guess my question there is, *The Weekly Standard* always attracted a readership that was going to be of the anti-Trump sort, so I don't get why Kristol should have been so poisonous to that magazine. Yes, it's true he's poisonous to a big chunk of the GOP right now, but those were never *Weekly Standard* readers. So what do you think happened here?

GOTTFRIED: Yeah, I think at some point, he and another contributor to the *National Review* and also *The Weekly Standard*, Max Boot, crossed the line. They became Democrats. And they appeared regularly on CNN and told the listeners to vote for the Democratic Party. And I think that was a little too much. On the other hand, it seems to me that there are certain figures with whom the conservative movement is stuck. It's not going to invite us on to Fox News. We're not going to become Fox All Stars. We're not going to be writing for *National Review* very often or ever. And Bill Kristol is pretty much a big fixture of the conservative establishment. And I argued in a piece for *American Thinker* about six months ago that if he decided to say, you know, "I made a mistake. I'm really a Republican. I don't like Trump very much, but you know, I'm a lifelong Republican," they would allow him to come back. They would not allow us to become part of the group, but they would allow him to come back because he was a fixture and because neoconservatives like his father defined the nature of the conservative movement back in the 1980s and sort of set the course on which it's been on ever since. So he would have been allowed to come back, but he did cross the line.

What I do find interesting, however, is that his son-in-law, Matthew Continetti, who runs a newspaper -- I can't remember if it's *The Washington Examiner* -- not *The Washington Examiner*; it's the other one, the other sort of conservative or quasi-conservative newspaper, smaller newspaper, not *The Washington Times*, that is active in Washington. He appears on Fox News regularly, and he seems to be holding the chair or the seat that his father-in-law held before. If you remember, it was the magazine that Kristol and his son-in-law ran, or the newspaper, which went after Trump with Christopher Steele before Christopher Steele went to work for the Democratic National Committee. But this is all forgiven, because Kristol and his family are integral parts of the conservative movement, and they came to define the conservative movement at a certain point in its history. But I think he did cross the line by appearing on CNN, becoming a Democrat, and declaring himself for Democratic candidates. And I think this did have an effect on the magazine, because as you pointed out, he is inescapably, indissolubly, inextricably associated with that magazine.

WOODS: That Continetti character you mentioned is just perfect for the role, because I remember one of the few columns I read of his -- I believe he was celebrating Buckley for having helped to keep the conservative movement respectable, because, oh my goodness, all the non-Buckley people, they're the worst. And just the instinct there is so the opposite of mine. My instinct is that the establishment is the horrible, unspeakable group of people you wouldn't want to be associated with. And it doesn't mean that if you're antiestablishment, you're automatically good, but it doesn't mean that if you are in the establishment, you are automatically bad. That's just a definite. And the idea that I'd want to curry favor with them and then cheer somebody who would throw his own people under the bus to appease them so he could go to their cocktail parties, that's not an admirable quality, let's say. So what do you think the practical effect of the disappearance of *The Weekly Standard* is, though? Not really a very big one, because the American right is still going to be, at least for the time being, dominated by conservatism, Inc.?

GOTTFRIED: Right, I think you're absolutely correct. By the way, I entirely agree with the sentiment that you just expressed, that any so-called conservative who's part of establishment should immediately be suspect.

WOODS: Yeah.

GOTTFRIED: And even if you're dealing with somebody like Tucker Carlson, whom I find myself often agreeing with, he does make concessions to them. I mean, he would not allow people like us on his program, and he typically has neoconservatives or just people on the left on his program. When it comes to philosophical issues, he's quite happy to accommodate the left. You know, they say, well, America was founded as an immigrant country or whatever it is, or a propositional nation. He'll always go along with this. There's no problem. He sort of picks his fights, but I think necessarily so because of the people who are sponsoring and to keep his program going. So those who are part of the conservative establishment are either utterly despicable, which I think applies to most of them, or else they are somewhat decent people who are trying to cooperate with what I think is a despicable establishment. I don't think the disappearance of *The Weekly Standard* will have any effect on the conservative movement. It will go on as it was before with just one fewer superfluous publications.

WOODS: Right, right. But at the same time, symbolically, does it represent the repudiation of anything, or are we engaged in wishful thinking to believe that?

GOTTFRIED: We're engaged in wishful thinking. I remember somebody writing me a note, saying that on the festival, Hanukkah, Jews are promised eight gifts. You've just received one. What are the other seven gifts you want? And I think my list came up with, you know, the disappearance of *National Review*, *Wall Street Journal* --

WOODS: [laughing]

GOTTFRIED: And if you give me about ten more seconds, I can probably come up with 20 more ideas.

WOODS: Yeah, I know. But, you know, every year the holidays come and go, and we never get these gifts.

GOTTFRIED: [laughing] This year we got one.

WOODS: Yeah, I know. That's right. You have to be grateful for what you get. All right, so in the meantime, I would like you to say something -- and, you know, this is crazy controversial for some people, but I'd like you to say something about the H.L. Mencken Club, over which you preside, because that's been the subject of enormous controversy and hysteria. And this is basically the dissident right. These are people who don't fit into conservatism, Inc., who aren't going to go out and give speeches about free enterprise, limited government, family values, and a strong national defense. If I hear that one more time, I'm going to engage in projectile vomiting.

GOTTFRIED: [laughing] Right.

WOODS: I mean, that is it. This is not 1983 anymore, for heaven's sake. So would you mind saying something about that?

GOTTFRIED: Well, I shall gladly speak about the H.L. Mencken Club, since I'm by now president for life, whatever remains of my life, given my advanced age. Yeah, it is an organization of the independent right, but we don't keep anybody out who's on the left or anywhere else. I think if we're sort of like looking for a model, the person almost by accident who ended up giving his name to our organization, H.L. Mencken, to me is a very good almost paradigm of what the American right should look like. We are an organization that believes in a very restrained foreign policy, but we are willing to entertain other views. We do not have as many questions that are off limits as would be the case for conservatism, Inc. and its almost indistinguishable counterpart on the left, although I have to say there are some questions that I am more interested in raising than others.

One of them is: is America in its present form in any way similar to what this country was supposed to be when it was set up at the end of the of the 18th century? To what extent is America a political success? How well have we guarded liberty? The person that keeps coming up again and again at our meetings, and it will come up next year, if you honor us with your presence, will surely come up, is the direction in which the United States is now heading. And I think most of our members think that, for those who believe in limited constitutional government and traditional families -- family values mean nothing. I mean, gay marriage is now a family value for conservatism, Inc. But for those who believe in these good things, will America in anyway preserve them, what America is becoming. And I have to say that I am profoundly pessimistic, and so are other members of the Mencken Club. What the late Sam Francis called happy talk is not something one is likely to encounter.

I think most of the charges that have been raised against the Mencken Club has to do with the fact that we are not an authorized conservative group discussing those issues the Heritage Foundation, AEI, and the Fox News All-Stars would like us to discuss. We're not members of the club. This is something that concerns me, because I think one of the major activities of the conservative movement for many, many years going back to the '50s has been purging its own right. And I think it has devoted at least as much energy to that as it has to fighting its enemies on the left. In fact, we have a book coming out on this, dealing with the conservative movement purges. And by the way, not all the people who were purged were white nationalists. As you know, there were people like Murray Rothbard and others who were proved back in the 1950s. What happens is the conservative movement became thoroughly dishonest in describing why it had purged people, so that most of my argument is in fact with

the conservative movement. I think it has betrayed constitutional freedoms. I think it has betrayed the right generally, and it has produced a generation of idiots like Dennis Prager, Dinesh D'Souza, whom I see on TV and whose podcast received lots of hits. These people are intellectually disgraceful. They're intellectual pygmies. And these are the people whom the conservative movement glorifies while expelling people like us.

WOODS: Given that our topic was initially *The Weekly Standard*, can you say something about this general topic that they, like other people on the so-called right, talk about limited government -- which, they must laugh when they say that behind closed doors. But they say that's what they believe in. But do they? Is there a sense that you have that their blood is boiling with moral outrage over the existence of all these federal agencies, and if only they could shut their doors? Is that what's motivating them? And if not, what is?

GOTTFRIED: Well, what they're basically concerned with is their own public image and being able to take advantage of their positions on TV and as representatives of the conservative movement. They are not interested at all in limited government. I think, as a matter of fact, they're interested in expanding government as long as it is in the interest of those who are giving them money. They're quite happy to take money from defense industries, which is doing major backer of conservative foundations. They're quite happy to expand the military. They're quite happy to get involved in foreign wars. Domestically, they do not challenge any of the social programs of the left. As soon as the left wanted gay marriage, gay marriage became a family value. I hear this constant yap, yap on Fox News about equal pay for women, whether they were giving this or not. I have no doubt that if they were to pass a law and if it were not to contrary to the interests of their sponsors to make sure that women get equal pay in various professions, they'd be in favor of that too. They are of course in favor of tax cuts, providing it benefits the interests that give them money. They're certainly not interested in limited government. I can't give any example in which conservatism, Inc. has been on the front line fighting for limited government.

WOODS: I'm pretty sure back in the mid '90s to '96, there was at least a time when Bill Kristol favored Colin Powell for president.

GOTTFRIED: Yes, there was.

WOODS: Now, Colin Powell does have certain merits, but if you think Colin Powell was going to get in power and dismantle federal agencies, I think you're tone deaf to American realities. That was not in any way going to happen. And it looks like Kristol wouldn't have been particularly unhappy that it wouldn't happen. In fact, I remember in 1994 when the Republicans had a big off-year election victory, and they were going to go in and make some changes, it was Kristol who was warning them, saying: don't do that. Don't do anything rash. Wait till we retake the White House. But apparently, retaking the White House amounts to putting somebody in who has no intention of doing anything.

GOTTFRIED: Well, the neoconservatives I don't have think ever claimed to favoring dismantling the welfare state or taking any bold steps. They were critics of what they saw as excesses of the Great Society programs. This is what you read in their magazines at the time, *Commentary*, typically. But they were always fans of the welfare state. I mean, Franklin Roosevelt is one of their heroes, and Reagan they admire as a moderate conservative. Although by the way, back in 1976, all the neoconservatives who were Republicans, who were not supporting the Democrat at the time -- and many were -- but the ones who were

Republicans supported Ford. They did not support Reagan. Then they jumped on the Reagan bandwagon in 1980 and became leaders in the in the Reagan administration. But I think the neoconservatives, unlike the other conservatives who are simply hypocrites and never claimed to be for limited government, I remember back in 1980 -- and I know I'm always telling this story, but I will repeat it -- many of the so-called movement conservatives whom I met in Washington, they were taking jobs like mad. And they said we're here to destroy the welfare state. Well, needless to say, they never destroyed the welfare state. They just found other jobs for family members, and the welfare state has grown, and most of these people stayed on in Washington, retired and then worked as lobbyists afterwards.

WOODS: Well, that's about what I figured. I hadn't looked into it, but that's about what I figured. And I know you're right. They don't really come out and say, "We can't wait to dismantle things," but when they say "limited government" over and over again, which some of them do, what would that really amount to if it didn't amount to -- I mean, in other words, are they going to take the existing government and just trying -- growing it slower, is that limited government for them? And yet when they get in power, they don't even grow it slower, so what the heck? What does it even mean? Why they even saying it?

GOTTFRIED: Well, I'll tell you why they say it. And I wrote an article several years ago that came out in Germany. I don't know whether it would have any appeal in this country, but I tried to explain that when Republicans say, "We favor getting government off your back," or, "We favorite limited government," they mean nothing of the kind. What they're telling their voters is: we are Republicans. This is a Republican slogan, which is actually no relation to reality, but which Republican voters want to hear. And when I meet local Republicans, they say we're voting for -- especially the older generation, people of my age, they will say that we are voting for Republicans, because the Democrats simply give us big government, and the Republicans are for limited government. And I'm always amused on Fox News when they say y blacks and Hispanics are going to vote for us, because they believe in limited government. Well, A) they probably don't believe in limited government, and B) the people saying it don't believe in limited government. So I can't imagine what appeal this would have to anyone except those members of minority groups who are paid by Fox News to say they are in favor of limited government.

WOODS: I mean, to me, it seems that they say it basically to dupe the conservative masses who just need to hear those magic words. And I think that when we looked at Ron Paul running in 2008 and '12, he clearly believed in limited government. I mean, really, really limited government. But there the problem was, again, they're waiting to hear -- they wouldn't put it this way themselves, but they're waiting to hear certain phrases and certain expressions and certain ways of speaking, and they weren't hearing those from him. So he can't quite be right. Whereas this guy over here says he loves America, and America is never going to apologize, and America is a -- so in other words, it's a very, very low-level kind of analysis. Now, I'm sure there are some high-IQ people who supported Ted Cruz. I'm not saying that it's all dumb people. But honestly, I think the run-of-the-mill Republican voter expects to hear a certain package of platitudes, and limited government is one of them, but not the only one.

GOTTFRIED: No, I think you're right. I think Ron Paul made another mistake in terms of winning votes. He was supposed to say that he's going to increase the size of the military, and he didn't say that. As a matter of fact, he said that there were wars into which the United States stumbled or pushed itself deliberately, as in World War I and so forth, which we

should never have entered. Of course, he was right, but this sounded very unpatriotic. And his unwillingness to give more money to the military meant that the conservative movement was certainly not going to back him, and when neoconservatives began attacking him as a racist or whatever, an anti-Semite or whatever, the conservative movement would generally go along. I mean, he was totally unacceptable, because he turned off their donor base, and most Republicans are all in favor of expanding the military. It's one of the pillars of the Republican party. So when Ron said something that was very different, he really doomed his campaign.

WOODS: And yet, you would think that you could make a connection between limited government and keeping an eye on the military [laughing]. You know, you would think the connection would be obvious enough.

GOTTFRIED: [laughing] That's right.

WOODS: And yet, it doesn't seem to be. Well, my understanding -- in fact, maybe I'll check this right now while you're here with me. It must have been WeeklyStandard.com. I can't imagine it was anything else. So my understanding is they were not going to archive anything. See, I still see it up. I still see it here, but maybe that's just temporary. So when their hosting expires or whatever, it'll just go off air. But, well here's an article by Paul Cantor. I mean he was in Mises seminar. That's at least something. But it's a cultural thing. They wouldn't let him talk about anything else.

GOTTFRIED: Right.

WOODS: So this is all just going to disappear, is my understanding. They're not archiving it. They're not preserving it in any way. It's just all going to vanish, unless Ron Unz wants to keep it, but I don't know why he would.

GOTTFRIED: Yes, no, I agree with you. No, but Ron Paul was simply not an authorized conservative. None of the people in the Mencken people are authorized conservatives, because we don't recite the obligatory platitudes

WOODS: Right, and by not reciting the platitudes, you get called every name in the book, but by getting called those names, basically, you know -- either you're going to live your life honestly or not. You just have to decide how you want to live. I mean, you can live as a shill to collect a paycheck, or you can live your life honestly and let the chips fall where they may. And that's a risky proposition, but at least you can sleep at night, and that's what I'm more or less trying to do. And plus, you assume that the high IQ people out there, they know full well that when you get attacked like this, they look at you for ten minutes, they see what you're saying, they say, all right, I see why he's being attacked. He hasn't done anything wrong; it's that he's just not part of the team. Of course, he's going to get attacked. Whereas a John McCain, who made who knows how many people's lives utterly miserable, not counting the people whose lives he's semi-responsible for snuffing out entirely, he's to be celebrated in the creepiest manner possible. That alone should make people sit up and say there's something screwy, that I'm supposed to hate this guy over here, who has no power, no influence, no prospect of having any power influence. I'm supposed to boycott and hate that guy and hope he gets ripped off all social media platforms, but this guy over here, well, he was a maverick. He was a maverick because sometimes he worked with Ted Kennedy. You cannot -- I hate the expression "you can't make this stuff up," but you can't in this case. You just can't.

GOTTFRIED: Well, I have to tell you something that I find even more amusing, amusing and appalling. Yesterday there was something on *Daily Caller* indicating that Ben Shapiro had uncovered the widely unknown fact that the Republicans voted in a larger percentage for the 1964 Civil Rights Act and for the Voting Rights Act than Democrats at the time. And he was debating with someone named Franklin Foer the *New Republic*, who seemed to be bowled over when he heard this.

WOODS: [laughing] Oh my gosh.

GOTTFRIED: We all know this. We've all heard this hundreds of times.

WOODS: [laughing] Of course.

GOTTFRIED: But we're not authorized conservatives, so therefore it doesn't count when we say it.

WOODS: Even when they're just facts.

GOTTFRIED: Yeah.

WOODS: I mean, our opinions are one thing, but they can't even listen to our facts. They might be contaminated by our facts.

GOTTFRIED: Right, right.

WOODS: Ugh, crazy. All right, well, I understand -- do you have another book on the way?

GOTTFRIED: Well, I have two books on the way. One of the books is this anthology of critical essays about conservatism, Inc., which focuses on the purges. And this is coming out with my one supporting press right now, which is Northern Illinois University Press, which is a good academic press. I wish I could get some wealthy commercial press to take it, but Northern Illinois is publishing. Then I have another book, which is half done, on anti-fascism, which Northern Illinois is publishing. And I have to tell you that when I did this book on anti-fascism, and the first part of it deals with Marxist critiques, traditional Marxist critiques of fascism. And what I find is I have much higher regard for the Marxists than I do for conservatives like Jonah Goldberg, Dennis Prager, Dinesh D'Souza, who attack fascism now. The quality of discussion among the Marxists is much higher than what I'm finding among the so-called conservatives whom I'm treating in the book. And I say this. I say this repeatedly, and I think this indicates the very low quality of discussion among the authorized conservatives, particularly on historical subjects.

WOODS: Yeah, I've definitely encountered that as well. Okay, so when can we look for those?

GOTTFRIED: Well, the anthology of critical essays on conservatism will be out next year some time, and I think at least probably by the end of next year, my book on anti-fascism will appear. I recommend both very highly.

WOODS: Okay, and I have no doubt they'll be of outstanding quality. I am a Paul Gottfried fan, have read and reviewed numerous Paul Gottfried books. Well, thanks, Paul. We'll get you back on. Let's get those books out, and we'll come back on and talk about them.

GOTTFRIED: Thank you for having me.