The Truth of the Matter

“British Elections”

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SPEAKERS
Heather Conley
Senior Vice President for Europe, Eurasia, and the Arctic, CSIS

Laura Trevelyan
Anchor and Correspondent, BBC

HOST
Andrew Schwartz
Chief Communications Officer, CSIS

Bob Schieffer
Trustee, CSIS

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Bob Schieffer: I’m Bob Schieffer.

Andrew Schwartz: I’m Andrew Schwartz of the Center for Strategic and International Studies. This is The Truth of the Matter.

Bob Schieffer: This is a podcast where we break down the policy issues of the day. Since the politicians are having their say, we will excuse them with respect and bring in the experts. Many of them from CSIS, people who have been working these issues for years.

Andrew Schwartz: No spin, no bombast, no finger-pointing, just informed discussion.

Bob Schieffer: To get to the truth of the matter on Brexit and the upcoming UK elections, we’ll talk today with CSIS’s Heather Conley and BBC’s Laura Trevelyan. Ms. Conley is senior vice president for Europe, Eurasia and the Arctic and director of the Europe program at CSIS. Ms. Trevelyan is a BBC anchor and correspondent where she has covered the United Nations, world news and politics.

Bob Schieffer: Thank you both for coming today. Heather, you wrote recently that this is an election for a generation and could not be more important. That it is about more than Brexit. You said it had massive implications for the integrity of the UK and its economic future. Why did you feel it is so important?

Heather Conley: Well, it’s really going to predict the economic path of the United Kingdom for a generation. If the Conservatives win a majority, they will withdraw from the European Union by the end of January under the agreement that they negotiated with the EU. Then potentially at the end of 2020 if there is not a new trade relationship negotiated with the EU, we could see where the UK makes a very strong decision to either go just to WTO, tariffs really transform its trading relationship with the world.

Heather Conley: But I think most concerning to me is the fact that the withdrawal from the EU has now deeply divided the United Kingdom. First and foremost, Northern Ireland, which is why there has not been a Brexit agreement for three years, why they’re still slogging it out. It has now inflamed Scotland’s desire to seek another second independence referendum. So I’m very concerned that the integrity of the United Kingdom will not remain should the Conservatives win a very large majority and pursue their policies, their divergence of policy of trade policy with the EU and quite frankly can begin to see the cracks within the United Kingdom.

Heather Conley: This one is huge. All elections are always difficult to listen to and to watch. This one is much shorter. US elections go on, they sort of never end. The UK has very short elections. But my goodness, I’m just looking at Laura. This one has just been absolutely horrific in the lack of truth and the name-calling. It’s been pretty extraordinary to watch.
Bob Schieffer: Laura, as you well know, the United States has pretty much turned inward lately. I mean we’re so overwhelmed with these cataclysmic events. This news that we don’t have time to analyze one event because it’s washed away by something worse that happens the next day. How are folks in the United Kingdom right now? How is this impacting on them, this election?

Laura Trevelyan: Well, it’s very interesting because Brexit is almost like an existential crisis for Britain in the last three and a half years. It was a 52-48 referendum in 2016 to leave the EU. A high turnout, 72%, people were very engaged. But nonetheless, the country is divided. As Heather said, the very union of the United Kingdom is at stake. Because Scotland and Northern Ireland voted to remain in the EU, but Wales and England voted to leave.

Laura Trevelyan: Before that referendum, there was a suggestion there should be something called a constitutional log in the referendum bill, meaning that all the constituent parts of the United Kingdom would have to vote for it for the referendum to be valid. But that provision was not in there and the rest is history. Whichever side of the divide people are on, and speaking to friends and family over the weekend, the Remainers are desperately wondering can they vote tactically in this election to make their vote count? The people who want to leave just want to be done with it.

Bob Schieffer: I want to be very basic about this in my questions today. Why do Scotland and Ireland, why are they going one way while those in the other parts feel a different way?

Laura Trevelyan: It’s a very good question. Well remember the Scots themselves are independence-minded. They voted against independence in their own referendum, but they’re now talking potentially about having another referendum. Scotland is the home of the Enlightenment. It’s the intellectual powerhouse of Britain. I think the Scots see their future within the European Union. They see the benefits that the European Union has brought through the Infrastructure Fund, through scientific exchanges, through things like that.

Laura Trevelyan: Northern Ireland remember is a very specific case. The island of Ireland is divided into Northern Ireland in the North, which is British and the Republic of Ireland in the South, which is its own independent country. I covered the end of the troubles in Northern Ireland. At that point, there was a hard border that resembled the Israeli Gaza border. It had watch towers. It had soldiers. It had checkpoints because of the troubles in Northern Ireland when the IRA were rebelling, Irish Republican Army rebelled against British rule with a bombing campaign.

Laura Trevelyan: In Northern Ireland, the troubles are a recent memory. Peace and prosperity that has come with the end of the troubles and with free trade across that border with the Irish Republic is very important to them. Just as a practical matter, they don’t want to do anything to disrupt trade. Now if Boris Johnson wins the election, Northern Ireland will stay within the European Union.
Customs Union. Trade there will be fine, but Northern Ireland will be separated from the rest of the United Kingdom because it’s staying in that Customs Union.

Laura Trevelyan: This is very confusing, particularly for Unionists in Northern Ireland who wish to stay within the Union, who feel that Boris Johnson has created a barrier. I know that’s a long-winded answer, but it’s complicated.

Heather Conley: I would just say, Bob, that I think many Americans forget the role that the United States played in the Good Friday Peace Agreement.

Laura Trevelyan: George Mitchell.

Heather Conley: Exactly, Senator George Mitchell in 1998. But in many ways, the foundation of the Good Friday Agreement was based on both the UK and Ireland being members of the European Union to allow that frictionless trade. Again, there is no accident that the last three years the reason that it’s been so difficult for the UK and the EU to reach agreement on this withdrawal agreement was exactly on that border. To maintain that frictionless border is really difficult.

Heather Conley: What the Brexiteers want is to remove themselves completely from the EU and not be tied to the EU’s trading patterns and regulations. But you can’t do that and have a frictionless border. So that has been the issue from the get go and will be a major division. I mean we’re concerned that Northern Ireland could return to some form of conflict. The paramilitary activities we’ve already had. A journalist, a BBC journalist, that was killed who was just reporting on an event and a stray shot and killed. I mean we could return back to conflict. That is what is at stake here.

Laura Trevelyan: But I guess the issue is that Northern Ireland itself, it does look like frictionless trade with the Republic will be possible. But is there going to be some kind of hard border in the Irish Sea between Britain and Northern Ireland? Because the Irish are now saying they will have to be checks on goods that are coming from Britain. But to be perfectly honest, most people in England probably who have never been to Northern Ireland, don’t especially feel involved with this level of detail. That’s really the issue.

Bob Schieffer: Andrew.

Andrew Schwartz: Thanks, Bob. I want to ask both of you about the leadership on both parties in England right now. In the United States, we’re obsessed with our own leadership in both parties. We’re following the day-to-day here. But in England, the personalities are pretty extreme too.

Andrew Schwartz: In the Labor Party, we’ve got Corbyn who a lot of people view as being a raging anti-Semite and a lot of other things. Boris Johnson, I saw some viral video the other day about he actually stole a reporter’s phone and stuck it in his pocket because he didn’t want to look at a picture of a sick child. Tell us a little bit about these personalities.
Heather Conley: Well indeed, this is very much been a focus on personalities. If anything, I would say the UK election is becoming a little bit more American-like and I don't say that in a very positive way. Because again, this is a parliamentary system. The parties, you're voting for your parties, your local candidates in those constituencies, but this is now feeling a little bit more American-style where the two leaders of the party, Boris Johnson for the Conservatives, Jeremy Corbyn of Labor. Of course you have Jo Swinson, who is the leader of the Liberal Democrats and Nicola Sturgeon, the leader of the Scottish National Party and others. This is now becoming much more about personality and you're absolutely right. These personalities have been on parade.

Heather Conley: For me though, it's less about the personalities. It is more about what's been missing in this campaign has been the truth and the manifestos or the party platforms that they release. There's just been missing truth, whether it's about the withdrawal agreement and the checks that are required on goods in Northern Ireland. It's the truth on the spending for the National Health Service. As you mentioned, that picture which has been, it's just been throwing mud at one another. The truth to me has been the victim.

Heather Conley: This is the most amazing part about this election. I said, I think there’s similarities here. You look at the approval ratings for both Boris Johnson and Jeremy Corbyn. They're incredibly negative. They're two very unpopular leaders themselves in their approval ratings. But in some ways what we're seeing is Boris Johnson is less unliked than Jeremy Corbyn. I don't know if you win that, but it’s an extraordinary show, none of the above.

Laura Trevelyan: Right, exactly. And there's actually a very smart ad that the Conservative Party just put out called Brexit Actually, which is based on the Love Actually movie. I don’t know if you remember that, which is starring Boris Johnson turning up on someone's doorstep with a whole set of placards and pleading, "I need a majority, every vote counts." And at the end of it he says "Enough," which of course is a sentiment on Brexit.

Laura Trevelyan: But I guess the point I would make is to Heather's, it's less the personalities and more the policies. I mean what Jeremy Corbyn is suggesting is nationalization of the utilities in Britain, for workers to have 10% of the shares in companies. It's a sweeping vision of the left, the like of which we haven’t seen in Britain since the 1970s. So it's a very stark contrast.

Laura Trevelyan: Boris Johnson, on the other hand, the conservatives have become really a populous nationalist party. He’s talking about increasing spending on public services because he's trying to steal Labor's votes in the heartland of Northern England to achieve something, a political realignment along the lines of Brexit. So that we're no longer a left-right country. People vote on whether they want to leave or remain. And if Boris Johnson is successful and picks up seats in the Midlands and in the north of England and steals what Labor has considered their constituency since the 1930s.
Laura Trevelyan: I mean Margaret Thatcher back in the 70s and 80s she was loathed in the former manufacturing areas, which now look to be on the cusp of voting for Boris Johnson, someone who went to Eton, who affects a foppish toff kind of a personality. And yet the issue of leaving the EU and a feeling left behind by austerity, the very austerity measures that a Conservative Lib-Lab coalition, by the way impose. But now Boris Johnson is seeking to flip that by saying, "We'll invest in public services, we'll leave the EU, we'll get things done."

Laura Trevelyan: The question is, can he do that? And that will be a fundamental realignment of British politics.

Bob Schieffer: Hearing the two of you talk about this. I mean, it's almost like you could print out something about the US elections and our politics and just erase a name, put Boris Johnson in here, take Trump out there. It's remarkable.

Andrew Schwartz: Well, they have the same hairdo, Bob.

Bob Schieffer: Well, exactly.

Heather Conley: But you're so right. It is a preview of coming attractions, and actually we're seeing, to be honest with you, there've been some news articles written that Bernie Sanders, some of his campaign managers are working with the Labor movement, which is what it's called. It's sort of it's young activist movement. We're seeing some of the social media targeting, some of the sort of stealing of voters and agendas and things like that. What's working. George Soros has entered this campaign and Russian disinformation.

Heather Conley: So in some ways this is a preview of coming attractions, I believe in tactics and in mannerisms to the US elections.

Bob Schieffer: But do you think there's something... I mean, I don't want to say something in the water, because these two countries are a long way from each other. What has caused this suddenly... I mean we're seeing kind of the same kind of thing's develop in Britain that we have seen coming here. And I mean our whole political system is, I think, on the verge of collapse. I mean, nobody believes anything anymore.

Laura Trevelyan: In Britain the decision to invade Iraq alongside the US was highly divisive and hotly debated, unlike here really. But I was covering Parliament at that point. And the decision to go to war, it divided the country, led to a lack of trust in institutions. And then the fact that Saddam Hussein did not have weapons of mass destruction, which was the basis for the invasion, left people feeling very disillusioned, lacking trust in institutions.

Laura Trevelyan: If you follow that, then with economic downturn and then you have social media, the polarization, the free flow of information. It's a whole storm that's happening right now.

Andrew Schwartz: Prime Minister's Blair's party never recovered from it.
Laura Trevelyan: No, that's the issue. And that's why Tony Blair was the realigning Labor Party leader. He was the person who won middle Britain from the conservatives.

Andrew Schwartz: He was the Bill Clinton. He was the centrist of Britain.

Laura Trevelyan: But the Iraq war clouded his legacy and has contributed to the leftward move of the labor party.

Heather Conley: So my theory is why we’re seeing such similarities is the center, the political center in both of our countries has utterly collapsed.

Bob Schieffer: Yes.

Heather Conley: And what you've seen over the last decade, and I think of course Iraq, which has a different impact but still felt here. I would say Iraq, Afghanistan, those endless Wars. But it was the 2008 economic collapse that completely changed the mindset. The elites were now the problem. The promises made were not. And then they had to impose austerity, which is still being felt very much in the UK, here as well. And so you have now the left and the right of the extremes that are now the guiding forces of the political agenda and of course migration.

Heather Conley: And this is where Nigel Farage, the leader of first the United Kingdom Independence Party, now the Brexit Party, that he had this iconic and horrible poster right before the UK referendum on leaving the EU with a string of migration, and this is coming to you. So fear, and there was real fear, economic fear, security, migration, this total collapse of the center, which is really the collapse of the political establishment. And this is why the extreme right's views and extreme left's views are now what's on offer.

Bob Schieffer: Was it the migration that caused a large number of people in Britain to decide that they didn't want to be in the European Union, is that the core reason that this happened?

Laura Trevelyan: It's also an emotive argument. Britain is an island. World War II was our finest hour. We withstood the Germans in the battle of Britain. We've always been half in, half out of Europe. We came into the European Union late. It was a French and German project after the end of World War II. We never joined the single currency, rightly so.

Laura Trevelyan: So we've always been ambivalent, ambiguous, and the sovereignty argument, the argument that we devolved our sovereignty to Europe and didn't get anything in return is very powerful for an island nation. My dad worked for the European Commission for many years. He was a diplomat in Britain, a civil servant. He worked on the sort of boring but very important issue of harmonizing agricultural rules, and his big worries, the hill farmers and what will happen to them in Britain without the common agricultural policy subsidy. But it seems like they may have voted for Brexit.
Laura Trevelyan: So it’s one of these things where nothing quite makes sense, but the emotional argument about independence and Britain’s great heritage as a seafaring nation and not needing the Germans or the French bossing us around coupled with immigration. Because at that point when the referendum happened at Calais in France, there were images of tons of refugees coming in from Syria. But that’s actually kind of outside the purview of the EU because Syria has nothing to do with the EU. But nonetheless, on an emotive level, it looks like people are trying to come to our shores and take our jobs.

Andrew Schwartz: What’s the most difficult issue in your view involving Brexit?

Laura Trevelyan: Well, I think there are two. One is Northern Ireland, the future of the union. And then the second one is the actual shape of our relationship with the EU. All we’re talking about now is the divorce. If Boris Johnson wins a majority and the latest polling average has him 10 points ahead-

Andrew Schwartz: So it looks like he’s the guy.

Laura Trevelyan: Well, we don’t know what will happen with tactical voting. If you add it up, the country is still evenly split between people who want to leave the EU and people who want to remain. If you want to leave the EU this election, it’s a pretty straightforward choice because Boris Johnson has sensibly neutralized the Brexit Party. They’re not standing against the conservatives and conservative seats. So therefore the conservatives should win those. They are also hoping to pick up seats in the Labor heartland and defend their Scottish seats.

Laura Trevelyan: But if you are a traditional Labor supporter in a constituency where the Liberal Democrats have the best chance of winning, there are all these tactical voting sites that people are consulting where you plug in your constituency, there are 651 in Britain, and if you’re in the south and you’re a Labor voter, do you actually vote Liberal Democrat? Because what you want most is to remain in the EU. So the polls can’t really measure tactical voting.

Andrew Schwartz: So your polls don’t work either is what you’re telling me.

Laura Trevelyan: I mean our polls look solid at an average of a 10 point lead. But the great British polling guru, John Curtis has warned that tactical voting is a great unpredictable, although he still is pointing out it looks like a Conservative majority.

Andrew Schwartz: Okay, so Conservative majority Johnson wins. Then what happens?

Laura Trevelyan: Well then what happens is we would leave the EU at the end of January and then Boris Johnson-

Andrew Schwartz: But we keep hearing it. We keep hearing you’re going to leave and then you never leave.
Laura Trevelyan: I think we will if there's a conservative majority we will leave because Parliament will vote for it. That's clear because Bruce Johnson has purged his party of all of the Conservative remainers,

Andrew Schwartz: So this is a done deal?

Laura Trevelyan: If there's a conservative majority, we'll leave. But then we have to negotiate our trade agreement. All that does... That's just the divorce. And he said that he will negotiate that trade agreement with the EU by the end of 2020. And if not, we would leave without a deal. We would crash out.

Andrew Schwartz: I'm sensing a lot of media appearances coming up for Heather Conley.

Heather Conley: I think it was Denis MacShane who called this Brexit eternity and this is where we think that this will be sort of the clear Conservative majority. Here we go. This is going to be part of this dialogue for a decade plus, and over 40% of UK trade is with the European Union. You are talking about potentially, if there is a significant divergence of that trade pattern, a complete reorientation of the UK economy.

Heather Conley: And so the question is, and the US has been part of this election for sure. The future of a US UK free trade agreement, Labor leader Jeremy Corbyn has used this to great effect saying Boris Johnson wants to conclude a hasty trade agreement with the US that will force US food products and the US will come after the National Health Service. This concern about what that future trading relationship looks like for the UK, they don't know what it is and quite frankly, prime minister Johnson doesn’t know what it is either.

Laura Trevelyan: The EU officials will not let Britain have an agreement whereby Britain undermines EU regulations, workers standards, all the rest of it. They want Britain to maintain standards. The very reason that Britain is leaving, you could argue. That's a tough negotiation ahead.

Bob Schieffer: Let's get to the local news here. How does this impact on the United States if they leave Brexit?

Heather Conley: This is where and following the day to day of this, which sort of absorbs all your intellectual focus and energy, stepping back, this is changing one of America’s closest trading partners as well as our closest partner in intelligence sharing, security and defense-

Andrew Schwartz: Our special relationship.

Heather Conley: Exactly. This makes the UK smaller in its ability to affect global foreign security trade policy. It makes the European Union a lesser force as well and in an era of great power competition where the US needs all of its allies, that is our unfair advantage globally when our allies are shrinking or fighting with one another, the US loses that. Of course this is what makes the Trump administration’s policies on all of this so difficult because at the same time,
President Trump has been very enthusiastic about Brexit, very enthusiastic about this new UK sort of anti-EU position and has been focusing on placing tariffs on the EU, left, right and center. Very focused against Germany as well as France and others so at the exact moment when we need our allies to be strong and helping us to overcome the challenges that China, Russia, Iran, North Korea, faces, we are diminishing our allies as we diminish ourselves.

Heather Conley: That is the maddening part of this. This really is important to the US and we’re not understanding that the tectonic plates have really begun to shift very much against the US, in my view.

Bob Schieffer: I must say that President Trump and I want to put this in context, for President Trump, he was pretty quiet on his recent visit there.

Laura Trevelyan: Yes. Very unlike him. That’s of course because he’s a toxic figure in Britain, basically.

Andrew Schwartz: Johnson told him to stay out of it.

Laura Trevelyan: Well and he respected that-

Andrew Schwartz: Which is shocking in itself.

Laura Trevelyan: Quite unusual, but I’m sure if the price is an election victory for Boris Johnson, then it was worth it. It’s just interesting the extent to which the idea of United States involvement in Britain’s health service is toxic. If there’s to be a US/UK trade deal, the Americans as we saw from a recently leaked paper to Reddit, the Americans, of course, as a result of a trade deal, would like full market access to Britain’s health service and also access to agriculture and other things.

Andrew Schwartz: There’s digital trade issues as well.

Laura Trevelyan: Right. The National Health Service is Britain’s sacred cow. It’s free to everybody in Britain.

Andrew Schwartz: It works.

Laura Trevelyan: It works. People like to complain about it, but compared to the healthcare system here, it’s a great boon, but if what the Americans want is longer patents for their drugs, that would drive up the price of drugs in Britain. If Britain has a shrinking tax base after Brexit, well that’s a big if, we don’t know, but if it does, how would we pay for all these things? How would we pay for all this big public spending that Jeremy Corbyn and Boris Johnson are talking about, if companies are leaving London. Of course London will always be London. Michael Bloomberg is building a new building. We have the English language, we have all these things which-

Andrew Schwartz: It’s a pretty cool place.
Laura Trevelyan: ... hopefully we will... Yeah. Exactly. It's Singapore on Thames as Boris Johnson has said, but how that fits with the desire of voters in the north of England for more public spending on them, I don't know if they're going to be part of the we work economy in Singapore on Thames.

Andrew Schwartz: Well, let me ask you this though. What is all this withdrawal from the world do to the UK?

Laura Trevelyan: Well, don't forget when we're not withdrawing, we're going to be in NATO. We are a permanent member of the UN security council.

Andrew Schwartz: But this is a withdrawal. NATO is not what NATO was and the UN isn't what the UN was and the United States is also withdrawing with an America first policy. How does Brexit affect the UK's standing in the world?

Laura Trevelyan: I mean it's a good question and we don't know the answer to it because we don't know what a post-Brexit foreign policy will actually look like. I mean, we're not going to suddenly become friends with the Russians. We are still going to stand for our traditional values, but there is a lot of sadness within the EU at losing the partner that speaks American, that are losing the [inaudible 00:29:23] bridge. The Brits have always been valued for their ability to understand America and to be that link and the French and the Germans who don't have that same relationship deeply regret the potential loss of us.

Bob Schieffer: You know, Heather, Laura says Britain is not withdrawing, but I think the question is the United States and how is that viewed across Europe? More and more we see the United States stepping back rather than stepping forward as we have in the past.

Heather Conley: Well, I guess the silver lining in this very dark cloud that we're seeing in this constant quest for sovereignty, sovereignty, sovereignty. I was in London in mid September when the parliament made a decision to actually approve the withdrawal agreement, the renegotiated agreement, but it was the day of this massive march where in London where I've never seen so many EU flags flying. My impression of that day was you never appreciate something until it is taken away from you. This to me is going to be the great learning experience and tragedy and the parallel here to the US is coming in a second, we don't understand and appreciate the value of working together with friends and partners to accomplish things until we try to do it by ourselves and then fail.

Heather Conley: The UK is about to get a massive lesson. It hasn't really learned it yet about the value of working with 27 other countries to amplify their foreign policy, their trade policy, their energy policy. The US is now beginning to realize, as Andrew said, as the president... Now, although I would argue with you, the president now views NATO as his foreign policy success, which I'm going to say is a good thing, but when we don't have a NATO, when we don't have a functioning multilateral trade system, we have to learn the painful lessons of
why these things are important. That’s why 70 years ago when the Greatest
Generation sacrificed enormously for the second world war, for the US that
is our greatest generation and greatest moment as well, they understood we
could not go back to that isolationism, that retrenchment. We had to stay
engaged to preserve peace and stability and to enhance America’s
prosperity, which meant Europe’s process.

Laura Trevelyan: Well, I would say that on a personal level, that is completely true because my
grandfather lost his two younger brothers. They were killed in World War II.
My great uncle lost his leg at Arnhem. My grandmother was a driver, my
great aunt worked for Winston Churchill, so I grew up with the second world
war as a backdrop and with this loss and horror and just this sheer
appreciation that generation had of living at peace. They saw, ultimately, the
decision to enter the EU once it’d been set up by the French and the
Germans, as being something that was going to underscore Britain’s
prosperity. Now of course they’re dead now and that voice has gone and
now you have a new sort of restless populism. As Heather says, it’s easier to
tear things down than it is to build them up, but I know I was very
influenced by listening to that generation. My grandmother actually was
American and she married a Britain, so she was in Britain throughout the
war. She didn’t see her relatives for 10 years because of the German u-boats,
so you couldn’t cross the Atlantic. The record of the letters that go back and
forth and the close ties between Britain and America there. We’re losing that
oral history now.

Heather Conley: I think this is why you’re seeing the rise in anti-semitism, in some ways. We
are pulling away from that here. We learned horrible, painful lessons. We
don’t want to re-live horrible, painful lessons, but a new generation is going
to have to understand and be able to build institutions that are durable for
the next century and that’s what’s been missing. That’s what’s missing in the
NATO conversation in many ways, which just finished its leaders meeting in
London with the 70th anniversary of that. That architecture and the
reasoning behind that architecture has fallen away. We have to give that
architecture new purpose, new vision, for a new generation and I just fear
that we don’t have the political leadership to do it and we don’t have the
public understanding.

Bob Schieffer: Well, I want to thank both of you for being with us today. This has been a
fascinating discussion. Thank you for helping us get to the truth of the
matter. I’m Bob Schieffer.

Andrew Schwartz: I’m Andrew Schwartz.

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