

# Steven Kling

November 19, 2021

1:26:54

## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

9/11, Afghanistan, Austin, Campaigning, Christians, Fall of Kabul (2021), Family dynamics, Immigration, International aid, Political candidates, Post-traumatic stress disorder, Reagan era, Religious nones, San Angelo, Service, Taliban, Travel, Trump era, US Army, US Military, US Military Civil Affairs, US politics, Veterans, World Cup

## SPEAKERS

Steven Kling, Eleonora Anedda

---

**E** Eleonora Anedda 00:04

Today is the 19th of November, 2021. My name is Eleonora Anedda. I'm working as an oral historian for the Institute for Diversity and Civic Life. I'm here in Sardinia, Italy on a Zoom call with Steve. Steve, would you like to introduce yourself and tell me where you're joining this call from?

**S** Steven Kling 00:25


Hi, I'm Stephen King. I'm living in Austin, Texas.

**E** Eleonora Anedda 00:29

Perfect. Thank you. Just to start, would you like to tell me a little bit about your childhood?

**S** Steven Kling 00:38

That's a very broad question, but I was born when my father was in military service in the Vietnam era. In fact, I was born on a army rotary wing flight base, or helicopter flight base, in Alabama. So military services has been a part of my family's legacy. Going back, I was now a fourth generation combat veteran. So my father served Vietnam era, my grandfathers on both sides served in World War II, both in the Navy, and my great-grandfather was a balloonist in World War I. He'd actually go up in a balloon and spot for artillery. So I come from a long legacy of that. I grew up as a child, that was very much part of my formative years, was seeing my father in a uniform. Between that and American football, those were my two obsessions: pretending to be a soldier and pretending to win the Super Bowl for the Dallas Cowboys when I was a little kid.



S

Steven Kling 01:48

We moved around when I was very little, but when I was five, my father got out of the military and we, as a family, established roots in West Texas, San Angelo, Texas to be exact, because we had family there. Not to get too detailed, but my father's maternal side had roots there, and his father was in the US Foreign Service. He's worked for the United States Agency for International Development, USAID. My dad, back in the 50s and 60s, when it was pretty rare for people to travel internationally a lot, lived in Costa Rica, lived in Chile, lived in Vietnam, and then finally Korea, and then traveled around the world quite a bit. So I had this interesting upbringing of living in a very small, cloistered, conservative West Texas town as a kid, but with parents and grandparents who had traveled all over the world, lived in multiple countries, spoke multiple languages, and had a very different and more broad outlook on life and the way of doing things. My family was this almost strange combination of very conservative religiously and very liberal socially and politically in some ways.

S

Steven Kling 03:20

Although I had just as many hardcore conservative political types in my family as I did liberals, I ended up becoming a fairly liberal person myself, mainly because I think of those sorts of circumstances, right. I grew up, I spent the next fourteen years of my life in San Angelo, Texas, went to Texas A&M University in College Station, Texas, which is known to be very conservative. It's a state school. It's not a religious school or anything like that, but it just has very conservative leanings. But I still felt very much of an outsider there. I would refer to myself as fiscally conservative in that I wanted the government to be smaller and only spend the money that it had and not go into deficit, but socially liberal person, very accepting of other ways of life and other viewpoints and things like that. I've even changed my opinions on that. I'm still very, very socially liberal of course, but I also feel like we play a role, and the government needs to play a role in shaping and incentivizing and helping the type of behaviors that build stronger societies. Philosophically I've come very far to what in the States we refer to as "the left," in that regard as well, which ultimately had me running for office a few years ago as a Democrat here in Texas.

S

Steven Kling 04:58

With that kind of background - I guess I maybe should add that in 1995 I graduated from college, and I started immediately working for a company here called EDS. Really not important the name of the company itself, but what I did is I was working as a contractor for FIFA, which is the football or international soccer federation. We did a lot of software and IT work for the World Cup, starting with France in 1998. So I was there in France when France won the World Cup in Paris, absolutely crazy day. And then spent a lot of my time in my early corporate years traveling around Europe mostly, but other countries as well, and usually living there for a month at a time, at least. Again, absorbing more culture, having lots and lots of co-workers who are European or African or Asian, South American. Again, gaining that experience that one gets to travel and through immersion in other cultures.

S

Steven Kling 06:14

So I was doing that, and when we ultimately - I'll skip ahead a little bit. My wife and I decided to move to back back to Texas. We had been living in Florida at that time, and we decided to

move to Austin. It was somewhat near relatives, not too close to relatives, but a healthy distance away, but close enough because we were thinking of starting a family at some point. That was in 2000. In 2001, I was working as a consultant contractor for a company, and the morning of 9/11 specifically - if we want to transition into that, unless if you want to ask me more about my childhood, we can that.

E

Eleonora Anedda 07:01

You can go on, and I can ask you questions later.

S

Steven Kling 07:04

Okay, very good. Okay. So that morning, it was a Tuesday morning, I was - at least it felt like a Tuesday. It was a Tuesday, right? I was swimming in a master swim club at the time, so I had a very, very early swim practice. I think it started at 5:00 AM, 5:30 or something. I had just walked back in the door to the house to get cleaned up and turned around and ready to go to work. As I was walking in the door, my friend called me, and he had just dropped me off. He was someone I swam with in the mornings, and I thought, "Oh, maybe I left something in his car." I thought, "Why is my friend calling me?" So I immediately answered because I thought maybe I need to go back to his house or something like that. And he said, "Turn on the TV." And I said, "What's going on?" He says, "Just turn on the TV. You need to turn on the TV, and then I'll tell you." So I turned it on, and immediately, the first thing on the television was the first tower - I don't remember if it was north or south, which tower got hit first - but the first tower had been hit. And I looked at this gash in the tower, and I thought, of course, everyone first thought, "Well, this is an accident. Something's gone horribly wrong."

S

Steven Kling 08:37

But I also have my pilot's license, so I'm thinking, "It's a clear day. It's not cloudy, it's not foggy. It's a perfectly clear day. Whatever hit that was really big. Too big to have one pilot, right?" These thoughts are going through my mind like, "How could this be an accident? There's almost no way someone could hit that object unintentionally." As I'm thinking this and processing what's going on here, out the corner of my eye I see this other plane come in and hit it. It was for me instantaneous. Now I'm a student of history. I'm a student of foreign policy and politics. The first words out of my mouth were, "This is an attack. This is Osama bin Laden." I mean, I was just very much aware of what was going on. Of course, I was very much aware of the 1993 attempt on the towers, as well. And the same group of Islamo-fascist terrorists that were trying to do this and said, "Well, this is their second attempt at that." I didn't really think much about the broader implications of it at the time, right? Of course, I had no idea about the Pentagon one yet. We didn't have any idea about the one that went down in Pennsylvania yet. This happened over the course of the next few hours, we would hear about those things. I don't remember the exact timeline of - I think Pentagon was next and then Pennsylvania. I think that was intended to be for the Capitol building or the White House or something like that.

S

Steven Kling 10:30

But yeah, the moment that second plane hit, I knew what was going on. It was interesting to watch that occur to everyone else. A lot of people, most people, weren't at all aware of bin Laden, Al-Qaeda, these weren't household names yet until that day. I went to work anyway. My sister called me later that morning, I think it was on my way to work. She was crying, and she's trying to process this, and she was telling me she'd like to come over later just to be near someone that she cared about, right. I just remember driving by people, just seeing everyone. It's particularly difficult to think about now because I felt a sense of brotherhood, of comradeship with everyone I saw that day, like we were all participating. We had all been hurt together as a people. And it was a really strange sensation that I don't think that we would feel today, which is really sad. I think today, we would immediately, within twenty-four hours, start pointing the finger of blame at each other for something like this. That's something I hadn't really thought about before. But I went to work, of course no one was getting any work done. The TVs were all tuned into the news, everything was happening.

**S** Steven Kling 12:16

Everything after that's a bit of a blur. Obviously, from there, I started thinking very hard about what I was doing. I was making good money. I was in my early thirties, I guess it's twenty-nine, actually. It was the first time I really stopped to think about what I was doing as a person, and what meaning did it bring to my life? What value did it bring to the people in my community, in my society? What was the purpose behind this kind of work, when there was now this war, and this incredibly important moment in time? Did I just want to be at a desk working and writing software? I struggled with this for the better part of a year because I was the person making the income for the family. We didn't have kids yet, but I was the main source of income for me and my wife. But I was immediately having difficulty focusing at work. My mind kept turning towards this, kept focusing on - I just felt like maybe I missed my calling, being in the Foreign Service like my grandfather had been, and really participating in the politics and the diplomacy that was going on now just seemed to be something I really wanted to do.

**S** Steven Kling 14:12

Over the next year, I started applying from everything for the FBI to Central Intelligence Agency, I interviewed with the CIA Directorate of Operations. I even flew out to Washington, DC and they did some tests. But what really was pivotal for me was I watched an episode of 60 Minutes. I didn't just happen to notice it. Someone, I think it may have been my father, actually said, "I watched an episode of 60 Minutes I think you really should see." I was able to watch a rerun of it, and it was covering a US Army Special Operations Team that was there on the ground in Afghanistan. This was pre-Iraq, of course. They were called Civil Affairs, and I never heard of this group before. But through the profile of this team that was on the ground, they were, first and foremost, they were outside. They were out with the people, talking to people, and most important to me, they were helping people. I found out later, we refer to ourselves as "warrior diplomats." We also refer to ourselves as the "pistol-packing Peace Corps." So that was a really compelling job for me. The idea that I could be on the ground, with the people, representing my country in a way that was trying to help them, help them build a society after decades of war and destruction.

**S** Steven Kling 15:58

It represented everything that I believed my country should be about. I have a lot of critiques and complaints about the direction of my country, but I've always felt that with our economic power and with the values that we claim to be about, that we never seem to live up to, but with those values, if we did live up to them, that we had the potential to help make the world a better place. That was where I came from, it was about the potential. And again, it came back to that sense of if everyone did this, if everyone jumped in right now, and participated, and helped, and we took this opportunity as a wake up call. Of course, we need to go after the people that are trying to kill innocents, no question about that. But if we internalize the message that was being delivered about the suffering of others, and insisted on making our values front and center in our economic policy, in our military conquests, and things like that, we'd go in.

S

### Steven Kling 17:23

And of course, I'm thinking we'd like to do in Afghanistan and ultimately Iraq what we did for the Japanese, what we did for the Germans, right? These countries, these peoples in World War II committed massive atrocities. But we learned some lessons from World War II. We learned some lessons from the punitive aspects of the Treaty of Versailles, for example, that set austere conditions on Germany, for example, that created the conditions for Hitler, that created the conditions for World War II to come about. We didn't make the same mistakes. We went in, and we embraced what was left of the people there, and we helped them rebuild, and ultimately, Germany and Japan are very functional and contributing members to their neighbors. They're also, ironically, pacifistic in a lot of ways, right. So I always thought, "Well, we should be trying to do that." And I'll admit to you right now, I look back on that with a lot of naivete. I look back then, I was idealistic about it. But again, it always comes back to, "Well, if everybody did what I was doing, and everybody had the same motivations that I have, and people like me get involved, that we can push history in the right direction, we can move things that way. That we need people who think that way, to be involved, and to be on the ground and to meet with the people where they are, and build those relationships."

S

### Steven Kling 19:23

I knew it was a really difficult proposition to try to change the world and change US policy and change economic, military, all this kind of stuff. I knew by myself, I wasn't going to do it, but again, I had to try. I had to try. So after about two years of figuring out what was what I wanted to do and how I wanted to contribute to this, in late 2003, I signed the paperwork to enlist. What's interesting about that is I already had my college degree. I was thirty-one at that point, so I was an old man compared to your typical eighteen-year-old enlistee, right. But that's what I wanted, so I walked into the recruiter's office, and I said, "I want to be in special operations, Civil Affairs, that's all I want to do." He said, "Well, have you considered being a pilot? Have you considered doing this?" I said, "No, no no. I want that. I only want that." They didn't even know how to get me in there. Even military recruiters didn't know the process for getting people into Civil Affairs. It was an interesting story. I had to figure it out and show my recruiter who to talk to and how to get in there. It was really interesting.

S

### Steven Kling 20:59

I went to basic training in early 2004. I joined the Army Reserves because Reserves is the best

way to go to Civil Affairs. Long story there, I'll spare you. But you still go to active duty basic training, you still go to active duty advanced training, so we did all that. The hardest part was that the night before I signed my contract, my wife and I went for a long walk, and we talked about, "What's the worst case scenario here for us if I do this?" Because you're giving up your autonomy, you're giving up a lot of freedom when you when you join the military. The military can, particularly at a time of war, they can decide that you're going to go across the other side of the world and stay there for years if they want to. You don't really have a choice after you sign this contract. I said, "The worst case scenario is I go to three and a half months of basic or three months of basic, and I go to three and a half months of advanced training, and then they immediately deploy me for a year." That's exactly what happened. I was apart from my wife for 605 days, I think. We added it up once, almost two years. After advanced training, I had two weeks at home, and then I was shipped out to Afghanistan for fifteen months.

**S** Steven Kling 22:45

So that tour - there's some interesting stuff going on right now actually, we could talk about if you like. But that tour was very fulfilling. I worked with United Nations. I worked with US Agency for International Development. I work for the State Department, the Agriculture Department. But mostly I worked with the people of Afghanistan, the sub-governors, the governor of Nangarhar, and we focused our entire year, lots of NGOs, nongovernmental organizations and international organizations like Red Cross, etc. And we built schools and clinics and fifty-six kilometers of roads. We took care of refugee camps, made sure that they had their shipments of water and food and medical supplies. We ran medical civil action patrols and even ran some veterinarian civil action patrols where we would bring in military veterinarians and military doctors to villages and make sure the kids got treated with everything from dewormers to vaccines, and even my family back at home got involved and sent tens of thousands of vitamins to give out. Multivitamins that here in the States or in the western world doesn't seem like a big deal. But over there, you get a lot of malnutrition. We probably saved hundreds if not thousands of people from cases of rickets, which is a major vitamin D deficiency.

**S** Steven Kling 24:26

So it was an incredibly fulfilling year, and I still say to this day I would still be doing work like that if I could get into a teleportation device every night and go home. But I was gone so long, I almost forgot what my normal life was like before that. Fortunately, I have a really amazing life partner in my wife, and she was there when I got back, we're best friends, and it was like no day had passed when I got home. But it wasn't the case for a lot of people. I saw a lot of marriages break up. I saw a lot of families fall apart while I was over there. At the time I was considering whether or not I wanted to convert over to active duty or not and stay active duty, and that would definitely require us to move around the country, if not the world, every two to three years. I realized that that's not what I wanted. I didn't want to put my family at risk, and that's when we decided to have kids.

**S** Steven Kling 25:34

We actually went to Italy and Germany in 2006 when I got back. I got back in late June of 2006, and that summer was World Cup Germany. Of course, I still had friends from World Cup 2002,

2000, 1998, who were working the German World Cup. So my wife Kelsea and I went over there and spent, I think, six weeks going from Germany and Sweden, and we just drove all over the place. To Italy, we went to Venice and visited Vicenza there, the military base there. Slovenia, Slovakia, a bunch of other places like that. The point being there is that that's where my twin boys were conceived. We came back pregnant from that trip, and then that, of course, changed the course of my life far more than I expected. My boys were born in 2007, and then my next tour of duty was in 2009. So I did about a year, year and a half, of normalcy where I went back to a corporate job, which was really weird. Going back into the normal world, after having been immersed in a completely different culture, not just Afghanistan. The military culture is its own culture, right, too. So I did that, which was particularly bizarre. Then sure enough, I got my orders to go to Iraq, so I did another tour in Iraq in 2009, 2010. I want to take a quick pause here and ask if this narrative is tracking the way you want it to. Do you want to ask any questions or just have me keep rambling?

**E** Eleonora Anedda 28:00

I have so many questions, but I want to give you the space to just tell your story in your own way. If you want to keep going, please do. I can think about the questions later and ask them later.

**S** Steven Kling 28:16

Well, okay. All right, sure. Well, I have a tendency, I know myself, anybody that knows me will tell you, I have a tendency to get philosophical, right? I love to read and my philosophy on life is what drives my decisions. So a lot of this is motivated by, as I mentioned before, a philosophical desire to be what I believe in, and what I believe should be the way people should act. So my decision to join the military after 9/11 was certainly based upon that, and then, my decision to run for office in 2018 - or 2017 was when I started to run - was certainly based upon what I was seeing developing my own country, and these patterns that we're starting to see in other countries like Hungary and Poland, of course, Russia, these illiberal democracies. They're not even really democracies, they're autocracies, and seeing that happen here in the United States.

**S** Steven Kling 29:35

I don't have any further misconceptions of what the problems that we have with our own democracy here. It's nominal. We have made some very poor decisions when it comes to interpretations of our Constitution that have given corporate entities the same rights as human beings, and that has led to, sort of, an oligarchy that has dominated both parties in this country for a long time. But what I was gonna say about philosophical things is that I believe in service. I also have views on the concepts of strength that I think are really important, and then when I get an opportunity to talk about them, I do. And in short, the idea of service, there's some quotes that have really hit me over the years, just to paraphrase, and that is that if you spend your life doing things for yourself, selfishly looking after your individual needs and things like that, that you live a very hollow and less rich existence than when you discover the beauty and importance and power of service to others. A lot of times people take that into a religious context, I don't, I'm not religious, but I do know the satisfaction and the sense of fulfillment that you get back when you do help people, particularly those in need.

S

**Steven Kling 31:30**

As someone who's physically strong and mentally capable, I think it's particularly important that those of us that have been blessed with those traits, that we stand up and protect. That has been our for thousands of years, back to the point where we lived in caves, is for those of us with a warrior bent or mentality, that we look after, we provide, and we protect. That includes those that we would consider to be physically weaker. And by no means do we ever exploit. By no means do we ever use our strength - and this to me is everything from personal physical to a country's military might. We never exploit. To me, that's a sin, right, is to use your physical strength to dominate someone else, to benefit yourself, to exploit that person. We're put here to protect others. Then the other aspect of that is that there's different definitions of strength. There's physical strength, but in the society that we live in now, particularly in such a high technical society, the strength of your mind far outweighs the strength of your size.

S

**Steven Kling 33:21**

The example I always give is that Alan Turing. I don't know if you're familiar with Alan Turing or not. He built the first mechanical computer, programmable computing device, the Turing machine, they named the Turing test after him, which is a test to see how good an AI is. You may have seen the movie *The Imitation Game*, read the book *The Imitation Game*, which sort of dramatized that. When people think about World War II, and they think about their heroes of World War II, they always think about the Sergeant Rock stereotype, charging the beaches of Normandy with no fear. And I always think about a couple of other different people. I think about the eighteen-year-old kid who may have wet his pants when he hit the beach at Normandy, because he's watching his friends get killed around him, and he still moved forward anyway. Right? He still accomplish the missions as scared as he was. To me, that's real courage, to be frightened and to do the right thing, the thing you need to get done.

S

**Steven Kling 34:42**

But the other one is Alan Turing and people like him, because if he had not cracked the Enigma code, those boys would have never even got to the beach. So when I talk to people about those concepts, I always try to remind them that in a world where you're hearing people talk about how alpha males need to be the ones in charge, and everyone else is going to be subordinate to us - these are the very authoritarian concepts behind that try to co-opt men's masculinity and try to make them feel less of a man if they're not part of this authoritarian movement. And I see it every day. I see it every day. It's part of that plan, part of that process of converting people to fascism is to monopolize the concept of masculinity. That's something that I think we have to fight against, and that is to show that real men stand up and protect, and we don't exploit. We recognize the strengths in others that may not be what we consider to be traditional strengths.

S

**Steven Kling 35:55**

So this is the kind of thoughts that I try to bring to any situation that I'm in, whether it's on the ground with people in Afghanistan or in Iraq, or it's dealing with members of my community



and trying to convince them not to let go the last levers of democracy that they have in favor of shortcuts. So that's ultimately what led me to run for office. I have a sort of pedigree that stands in contrast to what a lot of people here see as your stereotypical liberal in the United States. Decorated combat veteran, and just a strong record of service there that I thought might help burn through to people who just think that we sit around detached from real America, sipping lattes, trying to convert the United States to some socialist paradise or something. So that's ultimately what drove me is I thought maybe I could reach people with with that. I ultimately wasn't terribly successful. I think I was standing up against forces that are much more primal in some ways and much more prevalent than I realized here. But it doesn't mean we've given up, it just means I lost one particular election. But that's also gonna push me in directions of its own in that way. I'm still very much involved in Texas politics, and we're continuing dealing with struggles and trying to find new leaders and stuff like that right now. That's my story.

**E** Eleonora Anedda 38:00

Well, that's wonderful. I have so many questions, as I said, but first of all, I wanted to say that it sounds like you have a very wonderful and supportive family.

**E** Eleonora Anedda 38:15

So, I want to go back a little bit. At the beginning, you mentioned that you felt this contrast between the conservative environment that you were living in and yourself. I was wondering if there are some stories that you remember about that time, or things that you witnessed, things that you experienced, that could speak about that conflict.

**S** Steven Kling 38:47

Well, that conflict is best represented in my youth, is best represented my struggle with my Christian upbringing, and my eventual break from that faith. Well, from all faiths. I grew up in the Reagan era. When I was a preteen, I think when AIDS was discovered, and as a young teenager, when AIDS was really starting to take its toll in the gay community here and the rest of the world. And part of that struggle was, again, I was very much about accepting other people the way they are. One of the reasons I was that way is because that's what I learned when I listened in Sunday school. I learned that that's the way Jesus would have me act, and I took it very seriously. It didn't matter - he never said anything about gay people, ever. It didn't matter who they were, how they felt, who they loved. That's how I'm supposed to be.

**S** Steven Kling 40:00

But then I would go to lunch after church with some of the church elders that would join our family, and I would listen to these men talk about how AIDS was sent by God to kill the gay people. And it blew my mind. It was kind of the first time I ever really had to wrestle with hypocrisy of that magnitude. And I started really realizing at a very early age, twelve, thirteen, fourteen years old, that not only was this hypocritical, but what I was seeing was that men were making their God in their own image. They were molding their faith to what they wanted to

believe, and not what their book of faith was telling them to believe. They were ignoring that. You see that playing up big time with Trumpism and the evangelical church here in the United States, too, by the way. I know what I'm talking about, because I grew up in that. That's what people often forget. People that are outside the faith making judgments about it, we know what we're talking about, because we were once in the faith, and we left. So that was a big struggle for me.

S

Steven Kling 41:32

Being someone who was a Reaganite myself, but only because my parents, my grandparents, and everybody else in my family was pro-Reagan, and we had a few members of the family that were Carter and stuff. But it was like Reagan was so dominant culturally and politically in my West Texas upbringing. But then I started realizing, well, we're dismantling these parts of our government programs that are putting people who are mentally ill back on the street, because they have nowhere to go. Or this idea of the drug war or the war on drugs, it started to really dawn on me, again, at really early points in my life. What about all the people that are doing drugs because they're self-medicating their pain away? Is the answer to throw them into prison where they're going to be further abused and have further pain? Is that helpful? Is this sort of Puritan impulse to punish all the things that people are doing wrong, whether it's premarital sex to doing drugs, or whatever - this desire to try to punish the world into conforming to what you think the world should be - is that really helping? Because that's all I would hear from my family members on that side of the spectrum is, "We need to punish people until they fit this little box that we need for people to all fit in to understand them."

S

Steven Kling 43:33

It didn't take me terribly long to figure out that, "Okay, well, it might feel good to punish someone, but does it actually help you, or them, or anybody else to do so?" And if the answer's "no," and if they're going to continue those behaviors anyway, particularly something so primal as trying to avoid pain or sex, right, these different issues, and they're going to do them anyway, why not meet the world where it is and try to assist people through these temporary points in their life where they're experiencing pain or they're dealing with these issues, and try to guide them and provide them with the resources they need to be successful. To successfully come out on the other side of this a better person. And that's where I really broke with that sort of conservative Reagan era thing where I saw we're starting to dismantle these programs that were really working for people. Yeah, that was a huge source of conflict for me growing up. I really am very grateful to all the hypocritical members of my family that showed me what not to do and who not to be. But yeah, that's a long-winded answer for you.

E

Eleonora Anedda 45:10

No, that was wonderful. That explains it very well. Another question that I have for you is, could you tell me a little bit more about your military life? If you were to explain it to someone like me, who has no personal experience, what could you say about that?

S

Steven Kling 45:34

So particularly your first days and weeks and months in the military is a very purposeful indoctrination. It is the stripping away of your own personal identity. For an eighteen-year-old to go into, just right out of their parents' home and right into this sort of locker room style scenario, it's far easier than a thirty-year-old. I had worked my way up socially, I had a social identity, in management in corporate America, people reporting to me, I had a wife, and I owned a home, and I had so many different experiences already under my belt that going in for me. Then having all of that be rendered meaningless, and waking up into some kind of nightmare, like I'm back in an eighth grade locker room, but in my mind, I'm thirty years old, but no one treats me that way, was very uncomfortable and very challenging. Eventually it just becomes routine, and it becomes your day-to-day, but that was tough. Handing over your independent agency over your own decisions about where you go and what you do is quite a shock. If there's anything else about it, that's the most stark is that.

S

Steven Kling 47:26

But you learn a lot of really good things, and what I did see is how many people who did not have the advantages that I had. In the United States, unfortunately, this was one of the few options they really had, one of those few handholds on a rung higher that they could reach and grasp and get an opportunity, at least, to rise above where they were. There was lots of opportunity for education. There was a lot of structure for young men and women who were born in chaos, where their families were - for whatever reason, broken homes, substance abuse, you name it - they came from unstable homes, and they got a lot of structure and a lot of oversight and attention. I saw a lot of people because of that be able to kind of shift their paradigm away from something that was dysfunctional, into something that has its own dysfunctions, but still very much is far more positive, and gives them an opportunity to have some advantages that they were not born with.

S

Steven Kling 48:54

And it really gave me a much, much better understanding of the full socio-economic spectrum in my country. I realized just how the protected little world I lived in, the little bubble I lived in of being middle class American - meeting people from the poorest counties in America. I had to teach a child - a "child," he was eighteen - I had to teach him how to brush his teeth. He had never had a toothbrush. He had never seen deodorant. It was shocking for me to see that level of disparity. Not just economically, but experientially. He'd never been out of his county in his life, and he was scared. It was crazy like that. You learn a lot of patients in the military, we have a term called "hurry up and wait." It means that you're gonna sprint that 600 yards over to that parade field like you're running ten minutes late, but you're going to get there an hour early, and then you're going to sit there. Or in Afghanistan, you're going to rush because you have to get out, and you have to hand over your entire mission to the incoming team that you've been working on for fifteen months. And you've got to hand it off by this date, you've got to get out of there, so the new team can take over. Then you've got to get back to Bagram Airfield on this date by this time, and you do it, and you make it, you just barely make it. And you're practically expecting a plane to be there when you get there, and you realize, "Oh, yeah, we're just gonna sit here in a tent for three weeks." [laughs]

S

**Steven Kling 51:00**

That's the kind of patience you learn. I think you can only get a better sense of patience if you're literally in prison. But, yeah, those are the kind of things I impart on people. Lots of people have asked me over the years, who are considering military service. I speak to high schools. Every year, I speak to this one particular high school on Veterans Day, and I try to be the guy that I wish would come and have spoken to me when I was considering it, and or spoken to me when I was a high school kid thinking about military service. And that is just not come in and just wave the flag and tell you how great it is to be in the US Army, but to be able to tell you, "Here's some good stuff about it, but here's some bad stuff about it," and give you the full naked truth about your service and the kind of things that - you will give up your autonomy, you will give up the ability to make decisions for yourself, you will find yourself in situations that you did not want to be in. But yeah, it was good. I don't regret it, but I wouldn't do it again. Actually, for the record, I have fourteen-year-old boys, and I'm encouraging them to not serve in the military, for what it's worth.

E

**Eleonora Anedda 52:37**

I have to say, it's very interesting that you said that you found it a lot more difficult being in your thirties and entering the military life than an eighteen-year-old. I would have thought it was the reverse just because you have experience in real world and you have experience in decision making and responsibilities that probably an eighteen-year-old doesn't. So I would have thought otherwise, but that was very interesting.

S

**Steven Kling 53:16**

My experience actually did come into play when I was actually serving in the military. Training and serving are two very different things. Your basic training is a very structured existence. Your average kid coming in is probably nineteen, so they treat everybody like a nineteen-year-old. And it doesn't matter if you're thirty, you still get treated like a nineteen-year-old, and it's very weird and frustrating to be like, "I don't think like that." But downrange when I was in combat theater, I was very much able to bring all of my experience to bear. My academic knowledge, my technical knowledge. It was a huge and distinct advantage to have that real world experience. I had this one time when I was basically running a few programs and one of them was this program to take these Conexes - are you familiar with Conex? It's a shipping container. But you could take a shipping container and basically they convert them into living spaces, they can convert these things and they make them into little internet cafes, is one of the things they did. So they have this shipping container, and inside it the container itself was the building. Inside of it was all the gear that you needed, including a little internet satellite dish, everything sort of self-contained.

S

**Steven Kling 54:45**

I had taken on this mission of getting one of these little internet cafes put into every one of the districts in Nangarhar province. So I came in and I just took all the information, and I realized, "Okay, we have to do this, this, this." I did the project planning skills that I had in my corporate life, and I put together a project plan, and I started calling contractors. I'd basically have this summit, where Afghan contractors, and Afghan military, Afghan government, US government, everybody comes together. And I get up and I just say, "Okay, well, here's what we need to do."

And I run through the whole thing, and at the end of it, the guy comes up to me, he goes, "I can't believe you're a sergeant. How is it that you are just a sergeant?" He says, "I've had colonels that have not done as good of a job here." And it was nice, it was very flattering to hear this, of course, but that's kind of one of the moments that I realized that I do have some skills. I am actually being able to bring my old world skills into into this. So yeah, lots of experiences like that.

E

Eleonora Anedda 56:02

Related to that, was it hard then to move back home and then go back again to Iraq? How was the adjustment like?

S

Steven Kling 56:14

The hardest part was that like every person who served in combat, and saw combat, was I had some PTSD that I didn't even know that I had. I didn't even know how to recognize my symptoms. When people talk about PTSD, they often talk about the very stereotypical symptoms that you have, which are like nightmares, things like that. The hardest part is you get back in and you realize that your stress baseline has been reset. If this is your baseline back here in normal America, it's here [holds his hand horizontally in front of himself], and then you're going at the wire every day in Afghanistan in a combat zone, your stress level's here [holds his other hand horizontally several inches above the first], but you get used to it. You get so used to it that you don't even know it's there anymore, until you come back and everybody else's down here. You realize you're hyper-vigilant, you're aware of your surroundings. You walk into rooms, like a restaurant that was really crowded one time, and I felt this really weird sensation. I remember kind of patting myself for where my weapon was and then realizing I was back home, and I'm a civilian.

S

Steven Kling 57:34

Then of course having to sit at a desk job after that was challenging. Not just from a perspective of just having a new level of anxiety introduced into me that was never there before, and that just never really goes away. But just this going from such a fulfilling, dutiful task - this work that I was doing was really important work, we were really helping people - to coming back and sitting and writing software again for a year. By the way, I'm doing that again, but I've got better coping skills now [laughs]. But that was hard. And then of course, in that period between Afghanistan and Iraq, I had two boys. So my Iraq tour, I wasn't just leaving my wife behind who I knew was perfectly and fiercely independent and could totally take care of herself and didn't have to worry about her at all. But now leaving these two incredibly important little creatures who were just old enough to say, "Daddy," and just old enough to recognize know who I was. My last night at home was probably one of the most difficult of my life, knowing that the next morning I was going to get on a plane and possibly never see them again.

S

Steven Kling 59:20

That tour was different for that reason. I was a little bit - I had to struggle with not trying to be too careful. I had to struggle with not letting the desire to get home alive that I didn't really feel in Afghanistan - not that I wanted to die, it was just I didn't think about it. But now all of a sudden I had something to get home to, and I had people that if I didn't make it home would have a drastically different upbringing, different childhood than if I do. It was really a difficult struggle to put that out of my mind and still continue the mission and make sure sure that I focused on that, and not let my fears or concerns about about making sure that I got home okay override the right decisions that I needed to make for the team. It was very different.

E

Eleonora Anedda 1:00:17

What was it like to get back home again after Iraq?

S

Steven Kling 1:00:24

Well, I mean, there's really nothing like it. You have to subject yourself to a year away in order, which I wouldn't recommend, in order to feel that level of joy and gratitude. The fact that I had a spouse that didn't leave me for abandoning her twice, there's a sense of gratitude there that's profound, right. But yeah, there's nothing like it. You come home, and you realize it's over. You get on that plane, and you realize you're going home, and you made it. Yeah, I mean, it's indescribable. It's like coming alive again. It's like rebirth.

E

Eleonora Anedda 1:01:36

Yeah, I mean, it sounds like it as you're telling me about it, definitely. How do you feel about 9/11 today, and all the things that it changed in your life?

S

Steven Kling 1:01:52

Well, it certainly, of everything that's ever happened, was probably the biggest pivot point in my life. The moment where my life took a ninety degree turn. Where I realized, "I can't do what I'm doing now. I have to do something else." And everything that's happened since can be traced back to that day because the decisions I made as a result of it were just so profound. When you join the army at thirty, and you leave behind your career to do that, it's profound. Nothing's ever the same after that. When you do a combat tour, nothing about your perspective on anything is the same anymore. You take some things much more seriously, and you take a lot of things a whole lot less seriously. It's lonely, right? There's some lonely aspects to it. You come back, and people talk about trivial things, you don't want to talk about those things anymore. You don't talk about sports, or the weather, or whatever. If you do, it just feels like something was lost in that. You gained other things, but you sort of lose touch.

S

Steven Kling 1:03:18

People treat you differently, they keep you at a further distance. Same thing with running for office, too. They see you as a combat veteran, they get a mental picture, and they put you in a little box called "combat veteran" of what they think that that means, and it's apart from them.

You're a man apart now from them. Same with running for office. They put you in a little box called "leader," and they enforce a distance between you. I'm not that kind of person. I'm a kind of person that really tries to connect with the person that I'm talking to, and to feel them sort of placing a mental distance in their own minds in that way is different. I hope I didn't go off too much of a tangent there. But those are some of the more subtle things that I can trace directly back to 9/11.

E

Eleonora Anedda 1:04:25

Is there a pivotal moment as well that prompted you to run for office?

S

Steven Kling 1:04:35

Yeah, Donald Trump winning. It scared the shit out of me. And it should. That should scare everybody. The fact that he's still popular after watching four years of that absolute nightmare that it was for, I guess, everybody who's non-White, and not male, not Christian, I guess those the only people that I know that support him, White male Christians, with a few exceptions I'm sure, but it's really frightening to see my country respond to someone who's actively trying to dismantle the last levers of democracy that we have. That they would think that that's the right answer. It was an emergency beacon that went off in my brain, that I kind of felt a little bit ashamed that I didn't see it coming more clearly. I mean really, I saw that jackass come down the escalator, and I thought, "Pfft. Whatever." And then he starts winning. And then he actually wins - not the popular vote, mind you. But he becomes the president of the United States and then immediately begins to divide people and to demonize fellow countrymen. There is a clear textbook of fascism. It's a very defined path, and it's inextricable. Once you start down that path, there is no coming back from it. And the only reason that we even wrestled back our executive branch away from him was the last shreds of constitutional norms that we have left. We came this close to losing it.

S

Steven Kling 1:06:56

And I saw this coming five years ago. What I thought was, "Okay, again, this is an emergency moment. People are gonna see two years of this, and by the midterms, they're gonna go, 'Wow, that was a huge mistake. Let's vote Democrat.'" And they did, I mean, in a lot of ways they did. I took on a religious fundamentalist in my state in a million person district, that had won by twenty-five points in a heavily gerrymandered district. I don't know if gerrymandering has any meaning to you, but it's a very colloquial term. They get to draw their own districts, and they draw in the people that are going to vote for them, and they draw out the people that aren't going to vote for them. That's a really strange district, but where they have a distinct advantage. She won it by twenty-five points the previous time, she only won it by nine points against me. But I thought, again, this is one of these pivotal moments like 9/11, where we need all hands on deck. we need people like me to be very, very involved now, because we've been busy working jobs, paying our bills, raising our kids. But yeah, we can't ignore this really big piece of our society called politics that very much affects our lives and the lives of those who don't have the advantages and the voice that we do.

E

Eleonora Anedda 1:08:42

Well, I have two more questions for you. But before I asked those, I wanted to ask if there's anything that you'd like to talk about, that I haven't asked or something that we've already talked about, but you'd like to say a little bit more about. You can take your time to think about it.

S

Steven Kling 1:09:06

You mean I haven't talked enough for you already? [laughs]

E

Eleonora Anedda 1:09:09

No, you haven't! I could ask you so many other questions.

S

Steven Kling 1:09:13

Well, why don't you go ahead with your questions. I'm sure that will get my thoughts going. So whatever you like.

E

Eleonora Anedda 1:09:26

Just now you were talking about your campaign, so I was thinking - [dog shakes] this is my dog - I was thinking, there are so many young people right now who are going into activism and want to be really active in their communities, probably because of the same reasons as you. Something happened in their life, and they feel an urge to support their communities in whatever way they can. So I wanted to ask you, what would you tell them? What would you advise them to do?

S

Steven Kling 1:10:09

Well, it gets back to some of my themes of service and strength, right. Don't forget, try to internalize the lesson now, when you're young, that service to others is the true path to happiness and fulfillment. You're just going to be surrounded by people that will serve themselves. That's okay, if that's what they want to do. But if you really want to know what's going to make you feel fulfilled and whole as a human being, is serving other people, particularly those that didn't have the advantages that you have. You don't have to be a fucking saint to do it [laughs]. You just have to do it, and it leads you to all the other things. It opens up a whole world for you if you just say yes to it. And the other is strength. Know what your strengths are. You might be a guy weighs less than a hundred pounds, but if you got a brain like Alan Turing, you could win World War Two, right? Or whatever our modern equivalent is. You can do that. Know what your strengths are, play to those strengths, and look for people who fill in the gaps where you're not so strong, and team up with them, and work with them. Bring it to the table and just try.



S

Steven Kling 1:11:31

Again, just say yes. When someone says, "Hey, we need help with this," say yes. It's amazing how many people are given control things because they show up. I know the entire community of activists in the entire state of Texas. I mean, I know so many people who are congressmen, who are my representatives, my actual representative comes, hangs out with me, and five, six years ago, that was some person you saw on TV, you knew who they were. I'm not special. I'm very ordinary. I just decided to do something, and those people came into my world because I showed up. That's it. You want to be the governor? Yeah, you can be the governor. You just got to show up. You gotta work up to it, but yeah, absolutely. Particularly now, because so many people don't show up. They just kind of leave those things for those who will take advantage - [audio cuts out]. Sometimes my phone - let me see if I can put this on "do not disturb." In fact, I've got a new version of the operating system, and I'm not sure where "do not disturb" is anymore. There it is. Alright. I was saying we desperately need young people with a servant's heart. We need people of all ages, we need people where I'm at too, who care about young people and want to make sure that they have the opportunities to be successful that I was given, because those are going away.

E

Eleonora Anedda 1:13:36

What would you like people to know about veterans?

S

Steven Kling 1:13:42

Well, we're not monolithic. Every one of us is still an individual. We came to our military service for different motivations and different reasons, and we were changed by our military service in different ways. We left our military service and went on to do other things and to families and jobs and society that are different as well. I would say, getting back to what I said before, is don't keep them apart from you. Don't think of them as, "Oh, well, they're that," and try to fit them into a set of stereotypes. They're people, they're often the very best of us who, whether or not their service actually got to reflect those intentions, but had that impulse to serve their communities. And we all share a common ethos. We all share a common set of ethics that are sort of hammered into you, right? We don't all abide by them, we're humans, but we have a shared common experience and a shared common sense of values that, are, I think, good. They're positive. Sit and talk to one, like you're doing. We don't bite - much.

E

Eleonora Anedda 1:15:40

I have, I guess, a more light question for the end. But before, again, I want to ask you if there's anything that you'd like to mention before.

S

Steven Kling 1:15:51

Actually, when you first said that, I had forgotten about this one thing. But in the last few months, we had the fall of Afghanistan. I had been a sponsor on a Special Immigrant Visa - it's called an SIV - for a family, my interpreter and his seven-member family. And we'd been

working on his SIV for five years. Now, the reason I was so angry at the Trump administration is because four of those years, nothing happened with his application in the State Department at all. And the whole reason so many of these people are backlogged is because nothing happened on their application to leave Afghanistan for four years. In July, we got him out, and he had his family moved to Sacramento, California. They were lucky enough to have some family members in Sacramento. And in late July, I give him a call, and I send him an email. I hadn't heard from him, and I was kind of curious how his resettlement was going.

S

Steven Kling 1:16:55

And he said, "Oh, well, good, except I got this one problem maybe you can help me with." I said, "What's that?" "My sixteen-year-old son was left behind. There was an administrative mistake on his medical exam. He did his medical exam, he passed his medical exam, but the exam never got back to the embassy. So they rejected his visa, and I had to leave my sixteen-year-old kid." And his name was Adil. "So I had to leave my sixteen-year-old kid there." He did. He had to leave him. If he tried to stay and work out the problem, he ran the risk of everyone's visa expiring and him having to start the whole process again. He didn't leave him on the street. He had a very young, early-mid twenties uncle that lived in Kabul nearby the embassy. So they're very fortunate in that way. So he wasn't homeless, but he's still there. And then, of course, the Taliban start encircling Kabul. And because I had run for office, I had congressmen I could call. So I picked up the phone, I called Congressman Doggett, who's just this wonderful man. And I talked to his staffers, and I said, "Can you help me fix this?" And of course, they got right on it.

S

Steven Kling 1:18:23

Long story short, they were able to fix that mistake on August 14. The next day Kabul falls to the Taliban. The embassy, which is standard operating procedure for the embassy, burns every piece of paper that they have. They have giant incinerators in the basements of embassies, specifically for this procedure. If they have to evacuate, they take everything and they burn it, which included his application, his passport, everything. He had one piece of identity, his national identity card, in his possession, and he had of course a copy of his application. And we were fortunate enough that they had approved his application on a website. So we had a screenshot that his application was approved, which was very helpful. The next two weeks, I practically didn't sleep. I'm trying to get this kid through throngs and massive, dense crowds of people who had surrounded the airfield. We spent literally days and nights texting between the boy, his name is Adil, his father Sayed in California, spotters inside HKIA, the airport, people from the military.

S

Steven Kling 1:19:56

I was able to reach out to all these different people I'd served with, including the USAID representative that I served with in Afghanistan, who put me in contact with her friends that she had met in her network, who were able to reach out to the commander of the 82nd Airborne on the ground on the airfield, who sent a team late at night to go and grab him over the wall. It was like all of these pieces to come together in this moment, all of these relationships I had built throughout my life had come together, and all of their relationships had

come together to build this sort of network diagram, that created this path, to be able to reach across the other side of the world and pluck this kid out of a crowd and get him onto a plane and get him home to his family. It was amazing. It was amazing. I flew out to Sacramento actually, to be there when his son actually came off the plane, and I got to see the family reunited. I can send you that video if you like, if you're interested. It's it's pretty cool.

**S** Steven Kling 1:21:11

Through that process - another interesting story there - I had reached out to several people online that I thought might be able to help. Other people saw that I was reaching out to other people, because I put a post on Facebook saying, "I'm trying to get this kid back and yada yada." And some other old friends reached out to me, they said, "Hey, we're trying to get someone out, too. I'm trying to get my interpreter out, and I'm trying to get my interpreter out." I said, "Well, let's create a Slack channel. Do you use slack? Okay. Let's create a Slack workspace where we can all talk about this." Because we're just sending emails and texting. And I said, "Let's centralize this mission into a little slack channel. So my buddy Rick did that, and he created a Slack channel, and I think eight people [were] in there, originally. Then I brought in my USAID friend that I was telling you about. Then I brought in her friends and brought a few other people. And then there were all these other people that were asking me if I could help them. So I brought them in. I said, "Okay, well, we're going to bring all the people who have needs and all the people who have capacity, and we're going to try to do some matchmaking here." And we started to create channels in Slack. So if you're looking for help, or you have things or medical, legal advice, all these different things.

**S** Steven Kling 1:22:32

When Kabul finally fell, we got flooded with people that were both trying to help, were trying to get people out. At the end of it, we had Google in there tasking satellites, and having satellites retasked to point down on HKIA to actually do analysis, to see where the crowds were, to tell people which gates were open, creating diagrams and publishing it on the internet, so people knew which gates were going to be open, which were too crowded, where the Taliban checkpoints were. Lots of that. Legal teams helping, trying to get people through the process. We even had to set up security to keep from getting infiltrated. By the end of it, we had an operation of over 2,000 people on the Slack channel. From the Secretary of Defense's office, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, CIA, NSA, Special Operations Command, I mean, you name an acronym in the US government, and it was in there, and in some foreign governments, too. All of us trying to do the same thing, trying to accomplish this mission of getting their kid out or their friend out, or whatever.

**S** Steven Kling 1:23:59

It was really incredible. Incredibly stressful, but it was like being transported back to that point of service where you were doing something that was truly impactful and truly profound and meaningful. And I think that the thing from that is, I called it this convergence point, right, where all of the relationships I've ever built - from 9/11, mind you, to get back to the original point - that moment, 9/11, that built this entire network diagram again, of all the relationships, all the skills and experience and everything that I ever done, came together in that one

moment. We got over 800 people out. I still have several relationships with people who are still doing it, who are getting out several hundred more as a result of that. So been really something. Everything reverberates back to that one moment for me.

**E** Eleonora Anedda 1:25:04

Yeah, I can see that. I mean, this is a wonderfulâ€”I don't even know what to say, I'm really speechless. I have one last question for you. You said your boys are fourteen now. As you know, this interview will be archived, and your boys might listen to it in fifty years. What would you like to tell them?

**S** Steven Kling 1:25:42

Well, so I'm speaking to my sixty-four-year-old boys? [laughs] I hope you found your strength, and I hope you use it to serve others, and I hope it made your life very fulfilling, and I hope you look back, and you credit your old man for some of that.

**E** Eleonora Anedda 1:26:09

That was wonderful. I thank you a lot for taking the time to record this interview. If anything comes to mind, at any point in the next couple of days, something that you haven't said, we can always schedule another time to talk, so you know your story can be complete.

**S** Steven Kling 1:26:32

Okay, all right. Yeah, same goes for you. If you have anything else, you want to do a follow up, I'm here. This was lovely. I really enjoyed meeting you.

**E** Eleonora Anedda 1:26:46

I will go ahead and stop the recording. We can keep chatting.