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The Axe Files - Ep. 164: Rep. Adam Kinzinger

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Axelrod: [00:00:17] In a political environment that's marked by acrimony and gridlock. Adam Kinzinger is a an admirable aberration. Congressman Kinzinger comes from my home state of Illinois as is a Republican who very often is standing up and taking the stride voices in both parties, including the president of the United States on issues from foreign policy to health care. I sat down with him after Congress adjourned to talk about where we are not just in our politics, but our democracy. And here's that conversation.

Axelrod: [00:00:57] Adam Kinzinger great to be with you.

Kinzinger: [00:01:00] Thanks, it's good to be with you.

Axelrod: [00:01:01] Glad to see you got a break from that hothouse--

Kinzinger: [00:01:04] Yeah.

Axelrod: [00:01:05] Of Washington.

Kinzinger: [00:01:06] It was getting a little get a little dark. People were ready to go.

Axelrod: [00:01:10] So you and I have something in common in that we both get started getting interested in politics at a freakishly young age.

Kinzinger: [00:01:21] Yeah. So young.

Axelrod: [00:01:22] So tell me about about your interest in politics which began--what, when you were six years old?

Kinzinger: [00:01:28] So I think some people are hardwired for certain interest. It kind of comes out when you're a kid and for mine I remember I was in Jacksonville, Florida and there was a guy running for mayor of Jacksonville. His name was John Lewis and he was running against a guy named Tommy Hissouri. And John Lewis had gone to my church in Jacksonville and I remember seeing all these signs--Democrat by the way--I know. But you see all these signs everywhere around town and I kind of was interested more in the fanfare of it. You know what are the signs, what's the excitement. And I start to pay attention. My folks talked to me about what you know how democracy works, what politics is. And and I literally began reading the newspaper at like six or seven which is not normal.

Axelrod: [00:02:10] And I'm right with you, this is my life!

Kinzinger: [00:02:14] My folks are like what are we raising here, oh no. But you know paid attention and when I was 12, I remember moved to Illinois and lived in McLean County and got involved in the Republican Party there and really just it's something that I couldn't turn off. I tried to a little bit in high school because I thought it wasn't cool enough. And it just came back so yeah.

Axelrod: [00:02:34] So you came to Illinois at 12 and you mentioned that you moved to McLean County. Your your father worked for the state of Illinois.

Kinzinger: [00:02:46] Yeah he did. So we actually moved a little before 12, but growing up before we moved to Jacksonville, my dad was a bureau chief in the department of welfare or welfare fraud

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THE AXE FILES

investigation at the time. I'm not sure, but worked for the state of Illinois and then we decided to move to Jacksonville, because the weather's nice and my grandparents were down there and eventually decided to come back to Illinois. He missed it. And so we came back lived in Peoria a few years and then McLean County is when we found settled.

Axelrod: [00:03:12] He was involved in a faith based efforts to help poor people, the homeless. Talk about that.

Kinzinger: [00:03:20] So I always think it's funny to tell the story because you know I'm like look my parents are both Republicans. My mom's a public school teacher and my dad ran a homeless ministry and I forget, a homeless shelter. And so people always look and say well how are you a Republican. And I think that's what frankly makes me and I know it's out of vogue, but the idea of compassionate conservatism which is you know it's not about ripping things away from people, it's about how do we empower people. So my dad taught me at a young age, you know the Home Sweet Home mission which he ran in Bloomington. You could come there and recuperate and you know a lot of people struggling with drugs and alcohol. They had a few rules you have to be sober when you're there if you have drug addictions you have to be working on that. And then while you're there once you get out of the kind of initial physical recuperation stage, if you want to stay you have to be working to better your life whether that's figuring out how to get your GED go and you know some kind of school in a trade school or looking for a job and each person had a case worker that kind of helped them through their life. And so there was you know another homeless shelter that was more interested in just giving people shelter which is fine, but then watching the mission of the Home Sweet Home mission which was like--We want to help people improve their lives and you know you get sad stories where you know you have a guy that was a successful lawyer that they came in and became an alcoholic and lost everything in his family and worked to get his life better. And some people fail at getting better and some people are successful and that was what really inspired me.

Axelrod: [00:04:46] Do you--did you hear these stories when you were a kid? Did your father talk about this? Did you--did you actually go down to the shelter and see what was happening?

Kinzinger: [00:04:57] I did and I think you know at the beginning I was kind of too young to realize when I was 12 or whatever exactly what was going on as I got older, I got more interested. They had a thrift shop I worked out as a kid. I worked for like six months as a janitor which isn't the most exciting job, but taught me a lot. And you get to interact with a lot of people and just you know hear their stories. Dad would always bring work home but sometimes he'd tell stories of somebody that came in that you know and like I said earlier had everything and lost it and now has to regain. And so I think it kind of gave me an understanding of how quickly somebody's life can go off the rails and how to recognize that. But then how you know when you see somebody on the street begging for money and I have this problem the tendency is to look past them and walk away. But these are human lives with concerns and interest in family.

Axelrod: [00:05:45] My wife Susan always says that somebody's baby. And that just grabs me you know. But but it's interesting that that those experiences kind of accentuated your interest in the Republican Party. What is government's role. Did they did did that ministry get any funding from government.

Kinzinger: [00:06:14] I think it got I think it points they got some help but mostly it was self-sufficient came under the umbrella of United Way as well so some United Way help but mostly it was private donations and people in the community that helped out. And you know it is it's counter narrative which I think is unfortunate for my party that somebody can see this and then become a Republican that shouldn't be a confusion for people. But I've always seen it kind of this way is you know Democrats and Republicans are both very compassionate folks. They both have the same goal which is to help people in a very successful country. I see how to do it in this kind of gets into my rule of government. Government should

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THE AXE FILES

provide a safety net for people but also should do everything it can to help people not need that safety net and then his job is to build roads roads and defend the country and help educate people but you know and Democrats who I disagree with on some of these issues very compassionately believe that the role of government is to is slightly different in that. And I think this is something that's gotten lost in the narrative is Democrats look at Republicans as heartless evil people. Republicans look at Democrats Democrats as you know enabling and heartless in a different way and we forget the fact that we all actually really want the same thing as just the great thing about our country. We can debate how to get there.

Axelrod: [00:07:30] Do you think. And I don't want to get ahead of ourselves because I want to pick up the thread of your story. Do you think that the role of government is different in the 21st century because of the change you know you see on the Energy and Commerce Committee So you're you're watching the evolving nature of the economy, technology, and so on. So in areas like education and training do you think that--that was the congressman's cellphone. [crosstalk] For those of you that's OK this is what really matter. Yes this is real, life real life podcast. So we take--we take all the sounds that come with us right. But tell the president you'll have to call him back. Do you think that the role of government is different? I mean I think a lot about how fast things are changing and the economy is changing and how hard it is to get our arms around?

Kinzinger: [00:08:31] So I think the principle can be the same. But yes I think it does change to an extent. So think about you know back in the seventeen hundreds. They can never imagine autonomous vehicles. Right. And they can never imagine an interstate system and crossing boundaries from Illinois to Indiana would have an effect. And so you know as our committee is dealing with the the coming trend of automated vehicles autonomous vehicles happening by the way the fact that it's called autonomous vehicles somebody obviously did some research on that driverless cars a little better did I sourest didn't sound good so well AV is easy to say. You know this is nice but you see think about it. I believe the government should have a very light touch in this which is allow the private sector to innovate because of that innovation you know will be able to be Europe and the Chinese and anybody else we're competing against. But at the same time there has to be a role for the federal government because when you cross from Illinois to Indiana if you have different rules set by the state government theoretically your AV your autonomous vehicle could shut down because maybe Indiana has more risk more strict laws against that. So there is a role for the federal government there. I think you know we see in the banking system and in everything there's a role for the federal government to provide oversight.

Axelrod: [00:09:46] What about the the people who used to drive these cars trucks that are now autonomous as there is? I'm I don't have all the answers to this but my great concern is that large numbers of people will find themselves out of work. And what is what is the role of government to try and help transition these people to other other jobs and to provide some sort of security.

Kinzinger: [00:10:15] Yeah I think it's I think it's in giving people opportunity and job training to see what's coming in the future and give people that opportunity. So Rockford Illinois in my district it went from Tool and Die to now it's big in aerospace and there's a lot of jobs open in aerospace in Rockford. But there's a lot of people that were in tool and die I don't have the training. So how can we play that role is it giving money to the states and helping them innovate. Is it federal job programs. I think it's all the above what we have right now though is a government that over 50 years has grown to where there's you know dozens and dozens if not hundreds of job training programs. How do we consolidate that. But I think it's also understanding so with AV. If we don't lead this revolution people that are innovating the Navy that are program and all this kind of stuff are going to be located in Europe and not here. So it's understanding that that change is coming. And then making sure that we lead the way in terms of filling jobs to do that. But yes it's a it's a big concern in terms of you know whether it's a newbie driver or a taxi driver a truck driver or I think.

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THE AXE FILES

Axelrod: [00:11:19] That's just one of the industries that's going to change every industry is going to change every. I mean I think it's the logic of capitalism that corporations if they can rationalize their operations and use computers and robots. I mean we lose four of five jobs not to China and Mexico but robots and computers right.

Kinzinger: [00:11:40] That's right. So you know I think part of the role of our government doesn't do this well because governments are filled with a bunch of people thinking in your year cycles which is a problem but it's a fact we have to think what are the trends for the future. How do we lead that in the future. And I don't think the economy is a zero sum game so it's not a matter of if we if we lead the way Europe's not going to be able to do something or if Illinois does well Indiana is going to do poorly. But I think it's thinking kind of in that broad. I don't have the answers either to all of it but I know that technology is coming in and it can't be stopped. So how do we give people that opportunity.

Axelrod: [00:12:16] I feel so strongly about this and this by the way was one of my concerns about the make America great again approach because first of all I think America is great. But secondly in the intimation was that we could go back. Right. You know and that somehow we could rebuild the economy of the past when the world is moving forward. That's right. And we need a we need a strategy for dealing with that. Let me return to your story. So you've you're a precocious guy and you went off to Illinois State. [crosstalk] Yeah. Home home home county. And you ran for the county board while you were while you were a student.

Kinzinger: [00:13:06] Yeah.

Axelrod: [00:13:06] How did that come about?

Kinzinger: [00:13:08] So I went through a little rebellious period in my life and actually I just started telling the story because I think it's good to tell. I went to college joined a fraternity and failed out of college for my first year and took a little time with this guy to be the first. No and took some time worked and really realized you know it's kind of how some people take a super senior year or whatever and go travel. And I realized like education is really important. I can do this. I went back re-applied got in got my wife straight and I was at a Republican meeting a local meeting and somebody said to me I think it was a joke. I really do. They said you should run for the county board. So I'm 39 and I think I still look young although up it's scheduled to do is D.C. but--

Axelrod: [00:13:51] Everything is relative but you look young to me.

Kinzinger: [00:13:54] When I was 20 I looked like I was 14 years old. Almost no lie. So. So I decided to look at who my county board member is had been there for 12 12 years and decide to run and I ended up beating him and that's kind of a quick funny aside. I was doing door to door and I'd show up and say I'm running for county board and everybody would laugh at me because I was too young. So I switched to just calling people on the phone and it worked. But you got to learn your assets. I sounded 20 but I didn't look 20 but I end up winning that. And it was it was pretty interesting.

Axelrod: [00:14:25] What did you learn as a 20 year old on the county board?

Kinzinger: [00:14:29] I learned to shut up for a while. Somebody said to me they go listen your first year I think they try to do something for a politician who is a young guy too that thinks he knows everything. So for the first year on the county board never said a word at a county board meeting. And I remember on the 13th month so the 13th meeting I finally spoke up and people paid attention. You still had to fight the age thing but it was way better than had I come in you know January and started spouting about everything I knew. So that's the first thing I learned the other thing is you know look there's no black and

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THE AXE FILES

white answers to everything. Some things there are but for the most part stuff gray. You know if you're dealing with we take a lot of the issues in D.C. and see them as black and white because we've been there forever and we have opinions but we're dealing with something like should you put a curb and gutter in a rural area require that of a developer. There's no moral answer to that. And so you have to take both sides make a decision.

Axelrod: [00:15:22] I think that's why local government actually is maybe the most vital What is the cause? You know that's literally where the rubber hits the road and you can't hide it. You know when you're a local official People are always after you we had Mitch Landrieu on this podcast a few weeks ago and I guess last week and he we talked a lot about that. Yes it's a humbling experience to be a local official you guys in Congress are a little attenuated although it may not feel like it at certain times but.

Kinzinger: [00:15:58] Well I also think it's more personal in local government. So if somebody doesn't like what you did in local government you probably grew up with them and when they're saying that they hate you on the Internet or in the newspaper that's way more hurtful than if I look at which I don't really look at much anymore and it's like you know Kinzinger is a loser or whatever. I know this person doesn't know me and it's just the nature of the beast.

Axelrod: [00:16:18] Yeah I know the president does tweet a lot [crosstalk].

Axelrod: [00:16:30] We'll talk about that. But so you are first into politics. Your dad followed you into politics and ran for office. Did you encourage him to do that.

Kinzinger: [00:16:42] I think so. He was looking at it this was a state you see any other way around but he usually is a state senate race in 2000. Actually it would have been right after that. I think that yeah I think he's announced in '01, '02 was the actual election and it was against Day base it was an open state Senate seat but he was running against a guy that had been a state representative for very long time who well-known in Illinois named Bill Bradley is now the minority leader in the states ran for governor came pretty close and you know he and I get along very well. But that was a that was another eye opening experience because the state Senate districts are not near as big as a congressional district but it was huge. And I remember at the Michigan State. That's right. Yeah. And I remember at the end of the election this was when I realized this isn't going to go well is about two weeks out because they had just done redistricting. And so the maps were a little questionable. And I remember I think it was Decatur looking at the map and realizing we had about 20000 residents in Decatur that we didn't even know were in the new district. And at that point I realized that that's not a good that's not a good thing.

Axelrod: [00:17:44] You were running a campaign.

Kinzinger: [00:17:45] For a little bit and we handed it over to somebody for a little bit and then I took it back at the end and.

Axelrod: [00:17:51] So you got a chance to learn a few things that probably were useful to you in the future.

Kinzinger: [00:17:55] Yes. And I and I swore off politics after that after my dad lost. And but that only last for so long.

Axelrod: [00:18:02] No once once once it's like any other addiction to hard to lose. But you just you ended up serving in a different way and you enlisted after 9/11. Talk about that decision.

Kinzinger: [00:18:20] So I've always been looking at the military and I always wanted to fly for the Air

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THE AXE FILES

Force. And I never thought you know how to fly before you. Yeah I got my license right after college I graduated in December of 2000. And I looked at. But I you know I had always been told you have to be great at math and science and have good grades to be an air force pilot. Well I'm ok at math science don't know much about and while I do. But you know I wasn't I wasn't the chemistry major and my grades were great except for that first year. And I just didn't think I was smart enough to do it. Well 9/11 happens and I remember I was driving to work and I heard this happen. It's like there's moments I've had two maybe three but definitely two in my life that turn on a dime. One was an incident in Milwaukee and the other is the first one and this one I remember hearing the planes hit the World Trade Center. And people forget that up to that time we felt totally invincible and vulnerable. You know we had been involved in Kosovo and Bosnia but it was always wars over there and it was just airpower. It was never brought home that brought it home and I realized that my job was to do everything I can to defeat the enemies that did this to us.

Axelrod: [00:19:27] And and you and enlisted in the in the Air Force Reserve. How long before you saw action.

Kinzinger: [00:19:38] So I went to officer training and three pilot training in 0 4 finished pilot training I think it was like April of 0 5 and then I did my first deployment it was to Turkey so it wasn't extreme combat or anything but it was in a combat zone. I think that was fall of 0 5. I flew tankers KC 135 for a few years and then in 0 7 I wanted to do something more with the guys on the ground more in the action. And frankly honestly a little more dangerous and so I watched to you know everybody that serves in the military does extremely important stuff. I just felt like I needed to put myself more in danger not out of some sense of fatalism but just there's a lot of people dying on the ground and you know I love tanker pilots and I love flying a tanker but being 30000 feet overhead just didn't satisfy me. And this program opened up as part of the surge was the RC 26. So that became what we call a mercenary. So I flew both planes for a while but deployed to Iraq with that twice. And that's what I still fly today.

Axelrod: [00:20:39] And what what did you learn from that experience from your experience in the actual theater of war there.

Kinzinger: [00:20:49] I didn't you know you learn some from a tanker but from RC 26 I was based out of Iraq in Balade. We were actually in the Special Forces compound so I don't want to call myself a special forces guy but that's who we were attached to. So we supported them and you know we'd get attacked you'd have rocket attacks you'd have stuff like that mortar attacks. I think what I the most was despite I don't want to sound too existential with this are too political but it kind of helps me today. There were Democrats and Republicans fighting that war and we would talk about politics and have fun with it. But you know when you were in the action. No and I wasn't kicking down doors but I was 5000 feet overhead and engage in this. There's no Republicans or Democrats because we're all fighting for this country. And I think that's what drives me nuts today in this job is when I see people that sit around the voting box and they know they should vote yes for instance but they're going to vote no because they're scared about a primary or an election and it's like look you're asking men and women to die for your country. 18 20 year olds to die for your country. You've got to be willing to take that career ending vote if it's the right thing.

Axelrod: [00:21:59] We're going to take a short break we'll be right back with Congressman Adam Kinzinger.

Axelrod: [00:22:10] This point you raise about the perspective you gain in combat reminds me of conversations I've had here with others about what the impact was of the greatest generation in politics. And the fact that you had Republicans and Democrats almost all of whom had served in World War Two and had that bond and as they faded away you saw a new generation of politicians come along who really didn't have that experience. Not that many of them had served in Vietnam. And so you lost that

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THE AXE FILES

sense of common purpose of common values and so on. Do you think that with the rise of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans that that will have a calming influence on our politics. I certainly hope so. Do you do you. Are you friendly with veterans on both sides.

Kinzinger: [00:23:17] Absolutely. And I don't know if that changes the politics but I think it does change the tone. And you know you look back post-World War II. The good thing is everybody was united by a common cause which is communism is evil. Doesn't matter how far right or how far left you were. You fought communism so you can argue but you still had that common enemy. That doesn't really exist today. And so that's not that we need to create one but that's a that's an issue. But it does make it ever solves the second post-9 11 veteran elected to Congress. First was Duncan Hunter and and now there's plenty of them and I think I just read today that something like 20 percent of the house is a veteran. That's a good thing and we're seeing new veterans on both sides come in. And my hope is yes that we can use that to begin to create a narrative. The problem is the veterans aren't in power yet in leadership. And and so they're not setting the agenda. They're not in power in these in these whether these talk show hosts that are on both sides that are just spewing venom or whether it's these groups like Club for Growth or or freedom works or some of those groups that are interested more in in creating dissension. That's on our side and I'm sure there's that on the left. We've got to be able to get past kind of the noise of primary season and just do the right thing. And I think if there is a group that's going to do that it's these folks.

Axelrod: [00:24:37] You mentioned that you had another kind of defining experience and that happened up in Milwaukee. You know you fly into into a war zone and you know that you're at risk. And you know something dramatic might happen. But you had an experience Milwaukee that was wholly unexpected. What happened?

Kinzinger: [00:24:59] So I just gotten back from a mission. It was a domestic mission. Took my buddy and my girlfriend out to dinner and had a couple of drinks and I remember I laughed and it was on North Avenue and it was a German place and we left it. Remember 12:26 in the morning and this was in August of 0 6 and I'm walking to my car with my girlfriend and this girls running across the street hold on to her throat scream he cut my throat he cut my throat and she's bleeding out. I mean it's it's a mess. And I remember the first. There's a lot of things that happen in combat or in a situation like this you get time distortions of time slows down you get auditory exclusion so you can't hear anything but what you're focused on. And I had all that. And but the first thought was this is a joke it's like a Halloween prank but then I realized it was real and to make a very long story short I'll say there were two thoughts that went through my head. One is if I fight this guy she was being followed by the guy with a knife. And it was her boyfriend actually. And I said if I fight him I'm going to die or get stabbed. I'd fight a guy with a gun at close range before I would with a knife or a guy with a knife. The second thing though is I remember thinking specifically I can't watch this happen to her and live with myself the rest of my life. As a man as a American as a military officer. So a lot of interaction make a long story and.

Axelrod: [00:26:19] A lot of interaction. What does that mean?

Kinzinger: [00:26:21] So initially I try to calm him down. So he's kind of matching her pace so I think he's in his mind debating whether to go after her again. And people talk about murderous looks in people's eyes. He had it just blank. And I tried to calm him and he looked at me and look away back at her. And then I switched to like scream and yell at him to try to get him to bite off on me because I can outrun him. And again just look at me with a blank stare and go after her. Everything was happening I found out later there's like 10 witnesses. Nobody's helping. I'm screaming for people to help me. I'm yelling for people to get her in a car. It's all kinds of stuff going on at once. And interestingly my memory of this is way more clean than what actually happened I saw the surveillance tape about four years later and I'm like wow I was way closer than I ever remember. That's part of your brain's way to protect yourself. Anyway she gets in a car behind me I don't see this. He sees it and he flanks around me real quick and I turn and I see him

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THE AXE FILES

pull her out of the car and goes the stabber again and I grab his knife hand and throw my arm around his neck and we grapple for probably 15 to 20 seconds in the street. He's a bigger guy than me I'm not huge. And I remember he's trying to stab me now so the pressure goes down on the wrist and now towards my chest. And it's it's I'm literally fighting.

Axelrod: [00:27:38] And still nobody is.

Kinzinger: [00:27:39] Now there's a guy mirroring us a little bit. He wants to help doesn't know what to do but I made the decision and this is the first and hopefully only time I'll ever have to do this. I made the decision to kill him. I was within my rights to do it but end up after 20 seconds grappling him getting them on the ground pin him down. And thankfully I didn't have a third arm because that would have been the kill and harm. And so all my energy was in immobilizing him and my girlfriend turned around saw us down came. I told her to kick the knife out of. She must have been terrified. Yes she was she was very heroic in it though. Help this girl and everything. And he stopped fighting at that point. And I wish I had audio of what I was saying because I'm sure was a lot of f bombs at him. But finally the police show up probably about 15 seconds after I had them down. She's He got charged with attempted murder and she's alive. A hundred some stitches in and actually got out of that. Have you kept in touch with her. I did. There's on YouTube there's a couple of things where we reunited. That was before I was in politics and she's kind of gone gone dark since.

Axelrod: [00:28:41] Yeah. Well that's certainly preparation for some of these debates in Congress.

Kinzinger: [00:28:45] Right. And you know you always say no matter how bad something gets can never be as bad as that worst day.

Axelrod: [00:28:51] Speaking of which what you said you dropped out of politics after your dad was defeated in 2002. What caused you. What were you doing in 2000 and 10 when you or before 2010 when you decided to run for Congress. And what made you decide to run.

Kinzinger: [00:29:09] You know you slowly kind of start paying attention I guess I'd never quit paying attention but I was burned out. And anybody who's ever been in a losing race understands that feeling. And as you mentioned you can't you can't beat that addiction and started paying attention and I remember in 09 I was in Iraq and sorry Mr. Axelrod President Obama won and I made the decision you know I think it's time we need a check. I'm going to come back I'm going to run for Congress. And interestingly I came back in May of 09. In hindsight I wish it had taken a couple of months off to decompress but I didn't come back Iran and.

Axelrod: [00:29:45] Stop for a second because when you say decompressed because it's like I don't think people appreciate what the what the impact is on the men and women who are doing multiple tours of duty you know. And the sort of psychological impact of all of that.

Kinzinger: [00:30:06] Yeah. Well let me give you a quick example so I remember when you know you come in basic coming out of Iraq everybody thinks there's like this huge long process it isn't. You literally get on. I got on a plane and the Lodon went to Kuwait went to UAE or went to a cutter and then from Qatar I got on base an airliner that was all military landed in Baltimore. And and you're done you're out at your home. And I remember actually interestingly coming out of Baltimore there was like a line of 100 people that just stand there and applaud. And I always get kind of choked up when I say it because it I we owe a lot to the Vietnam Veterans for what they went through and they never got the the never got it. And they we learned a tough lesson from that. Some walking through these lines getting applauds get an airline. And I'm home. Somebody that picked me up I'll protect this person's identity. I remember I was talking a little about the war. And she immediately just goes Yeah but you know what Tina said to me and

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THE AXE FILES

Tina's was yelling at Joe or whatever it was and it's just the minutia of home life that you just realized you had just left a war three days ago and somebody is complaining about what Tina said and that it's hard to explain it until you've been there.

Axelrod: [00:31:18] So. So you you didn't decompress but you instead decided to run for Congress.

Kinzinger: [00:31:24] A different kind of combat. So I decided to run. And the interesting thing what I had to get past I was 31 I think is when I would tell people I was running for Congress I'd kind of laugh when I'd say it because you felt totally unworthy of it. Like yeah I'm running for Congress. Ha. You know and and ran against an incumbent here in Illinois and it took me probably six months of pounding pavement doing all that go and every meeting for people to start taking me seriously. And that's a lesson I give to anybody coming into politics.

Axelrod: [00:31:55] I don't recall that did the party recruit you or did you have other ever you have but do you ever win a primary.

Kinzinger: [00:32:01] I did. I had a five or six way primary and I got like 65 percent in it. So it was good. It was good showing. But no in fact initially the party seemed a little resistance I mean and but not in a way because I wasn't from Will County which was the biggest at the time in that district the biggest part of it was from downstate us from Bloomington Will County was 50 percent of the district. But I didn't take no for an answer and eventually caught fire a little bit and the party won that primary. And then you know it was off to the general election and.

Axelrod: [00:32:32] Which you won by more than a little.

Kinzinger: [00:32:34] Yeah it was it was a good it was a good victory. I had a good opponent and a good year. It was a good year. Yeah that was extremely helpful too. And but it was like for about a year and a half. I mean I wasn't making much money I was doing traditional Guard stuff so I was getting paid that was dipping into savings a lot of people do this is what a lot of people don't realize. They think everybody coming into Congress is rich and vast majority of them aren't talking to a good friend of mine and leadership this as he basically drained all his accounts to live on to run for Congress. And you know it takes a lot of sacrifice.

Axelrod: [00:33:05] What what did you learn about Congress that you didn't what what did you expect Congress to be when you got there and what what was it when you arrive?

Kinzinger: [00:33:16] You know my expectation of it was I think people go in expecting you can do way more than you can do alone. You can do alone way more than you can. I didn't really have that because I had known teamwork you know through the military and everything I knew that in order to achieve things you have to work together as a team is kind of a big problem our Republican Party is having today. So I think my biggest expectation that was thrown out was just how busy it really is. People look at the calendar and they say oh you're off in August or you have this week off but they forget that you have to go home. You're traveling your district. You have all these pressures from everywhere else. And to me I think what was what was the biggest surprise was the 80 or 90 hour work weeks you put in the.

Axelrod: [00:33:59] And obviously I saw from the other side. But what to find your your period in Congress not you personally but the Congress itself was very much opposition to Obama was that it was politically I guess valuable for Republicans was it. Was it healthy for the party in the long run?

Kinzinger: [00:34:25] No and it's not good for the country. And this is not that anybody is going to listen to me but the advice I'd give to my friends in the on the other side of the aisle is you know our mistake was

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at the beginning when we came in. We had a real opportunity to work with the president on a couple of things. One was when we reached that the whole debt limit issue and we were under sequester today we had we had gotten between the president and John Boehner very close to a deal. And for whatever reason both sides claim it's the other side for whatever reason it fell apart. But had.

Axelrod: [00:34:59] On the larger debt issue.

Kinzinger: [00:35:01] On the larger debt issue and we wouldn't be under sequester today we'd had some good reforms and I think Americans would have felt better about government. And then it was like kind of after. And in 2012 when we lost the race in 2012 we went in January and got together and came up with our principles for immigration reform. We were going to do this we are going to work with the administration to get immigration reform done. President Obama had said look I'm willing to put some things on the table to get to this. We were close and then it was kind of angry voices on the radio and everything else that that should shut that down within a month or two.

Axelrod: [00:35:35] You mentioned.

Kinzinger: [00:35:35] We're in our corners now.

Axelrod: [00:35:36] And you mentioned that debt ceiling fight. I remember it very well I had left the White House by then but it was probably the nadir of the Obama administration. And we came very close to a crisis. You guys are facing another debt ceiling vote. The Trump administration through the Treasury secretary Mnuchin and said that he needs a clean debt ceiling bill. What are the. How confident are you that Congress will give him that.

Kinzinger: [00:36:05] I'm confident. I think it will be both sides voting to give it you know the concerns we've had in the past. I never on the campaign trail promised to never raise the debt limit. That was something that my campaign manager wisely said never say which you'll never do. And the debt limit is not the permission to spend the money the money spent. A debt limit basically says you got your credit card bill and to save money you're just not going to pay your credit card. That's what a debt limit is. So I believe it's fiscally responsible to pay the credit card. Some people have tried to use leverage as the debt point is a bit of a leverage for that debt deal that led to sequester. I think that was OK at the time. But now look we've we've I think to play with the good faith. People forget the market felt like 2000 points were close to that to that end that was a real impact.

Axelrod: [00:36:53] Yeah. You're one of the recognized certainly that one of the most valuable and interesting spokespeople on national security issues. Now in your committee assignment foreign relations you gives you that platform. Tell me where we are in the world today because we were facing this emerging threat North Korea maybe more than emerging civil war in Syria. Obviously tensions with Russia just give me a little tour starting with North Korea.

Kinzinger: [00:37:38] So North Korea is in a very frightening position. I got a good classified briefing on it just about a week ago before this even second ICBM test. They're way further along than we expected them to be. This is this is bad. And that's just what it comes down to. And and you know I think we have to prepare quickly for three different things. Number one we have to continue to increase our missile defense system which President Obama and President Bush did very well. We have to continue to do that to stay in front of the threat. We have to leverage more pressure against China to include areas of businesses that do business in both North Korea and the United States that gives us a lot of leverage. But lastly we have to prepare for military action and hope pray God we never ever ever have to use it. It would be devastating. But having a credible military option gives us more leverage in the region. We're looking at like Syria Syria I think is one of the biggest drivers of instability. Half a million dead Syrians right

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now that is incubating ISIS and inking baiting extremism. One of the things that I get concerned about when we talk about foreign policy is this idea that when ISIS is gone everything is going to be great. No what I worry about is the seven and eight year olds and independently displaced camps or refugee camps. They're the next generation of terrorists. If they don't get a chance to read to write and have hope those three things plus you know economic opportunity is the biggest disinfectant a terrorist recruitment. Somebody with hope. That's why we don't have large scale people turning to terrorism in the United States because they have hope when you're hopeless and you have nothing to live for is when somebody can convince.

Axelrod: [00:39:17] Let me ask you about this because one of the. Because the sort of skinny budget of the administration called for significant cuts in the state department which I think popularly is viewed as having a lot more resources than it actually does it's a very small part of the budget isn't it in the interest of the country of our national security to try and relieve some of these burdens and pressures that you speak of to try and make sure that people are educated to try and make sure that they're healthy to try and make sure that they see a future of opportunity. This there is this notion and the president's been one of those who has propagated it that America first means that we turn away from those kinds of investments. It seems that those kind of investments are the cheapest investments in our national security.

Kinzinger: [00:40:14] So I was in Kenya recently went to a village where we're teaching them how to frankly feed and milk cows and given them opportunity we build a co-op for them. And now these these is a guy from the University of Illinois that went there and and this village now has hope and opportunity even though they make only three dollars a day that's way more than the 50 cents a day they had. So they literally look at the United States as having saved them. You're not going to recruit in a Muslim village. You're not going to recruit a terrorist out of that if you replicate that and give people in Syria hope through USAID through State Department through soft power. That's the best way to deprive ISIS of a terrorist. Except for you know instead of a 500 pound JBU laser guided or guided bomb it's way cheaper and way more effective there can be some reforms in the State Department. There should be but we cannot forget that mission. We can't complain about China's influence in Africa for not willing to invest as well.

Axelrod: [00:41:12] The secretary of defense Mattis I think testified when he was up for confirmation that if you give less money to the Department the State Department then you've got to give me a lot more. We're going to have more conflicts.

Kinzinger: [00:41:28] Absolutely. And by the way in these conflicts we're wearing out our F-16s we're wearing out our planes we're doing war the same way we have for 16 years so our enemy knows how we do war. So we're exposing vulnerabilities there and we're going to have to recapitalize our our stuff. And that's going to take a lot of money. So while we're engaged in war basically you're in the red in the military in terms of you're gonna have to pay for this later.

Axelrod: [00:41:53] We're going to take another break and we'll be right back with Congressman Adam Kinzinger.

Axelrod: [00:42:04] I want to just return to North Korea for a second because I asked you a multi-pronged question. Always a mistake and you get to answer it. But how grave a threat is this and what is your level of concern about it. And and at the end of the day how limited are option because you mentioned military as the unthinkable as the unthinkable option because of the bloodshed that it would lead to. So what realistically are chances to stop short of that.

Kinzinger: [00:42:43] Well I think it's going to depend there are chief trading partner is China. And right

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now China sees the existence of North Korea both as a buffer to us but also they don't want the mass refugee problem for North Korea. So it's in their interest right now in their minds I think wrongly that North Korea existing is better. They don't want North to have nukes but they also don't want to confront them. So what are options. I think leverage on China is important. Try to change your way of thinking on this and the military.

Axelrod: [00:43:13] President's engaged in kind of a tweet storm.

Kinzinger: [00:43:15] Yeah I don't like that.

Axelrod: [00:43:16] Do you think that's effective.

Kinzinger: [00:43:18] Nope. I don't think Twitter is really that effective on foreign policy especially but that's just my opinion and maybe I'm too old school even though I'm young. But on the military side there is a we have military options to be able to take out their nuclear capacity before they launch it to be able to. We will win if there is a war in the North Korea on the peninsula. We will win.

Axelrod: [00:43:38] It's just a question of how many of us have including the South Koreans right. And the price they pay.

Kinzinger: [00:43:44] Yeah. And you know we've gotten I hate the sounds de minimus.

Axelrod: [00:43:48] We just point out how close Seoul is to.

Kinzinger: [00:43:51] It's in artillery range of thousands of artillery pieces from them. They've been preparing for this for years. But you know I think the thing we have to remember is we've been lucky relatively and I know it's it's it's it can sound heartless to say but we've had wars in the past kind of 20 years with relatively light casualties compared to what they've been in the past. You know the Korean War World War II etc.. It's possible that if North Korea happens we're back to where we're losing as many people as we did in Vietnam. Tragically like war used to be. So there's military options but that is the last. Well I think the last the worst case scenario is they're getting ready to launch a nuke at somebody or us the next to last though is military action but we have to be prepared. And they know and they should know that we will win. But there is going to be significant bloodshed and costs. I'm not sure in for any military strikes.

Axelrod: [00:44:42] But if the if if Kim Kim Jong un believes that he is doomed either way then certainly he like any sort of suicide bomber would be less reluctant to do the unthinkable.

Kinzinger: [00:44:59] Yeah and that's the question is is he a Nihilist or is he rational. I don't know if anybody really knows that answer. I say he acts crazy but you know he may be crazy like a fox on some of this stuff as far as he's concerned. I don't think as far as in terms of how he actually acts so that's the question now. We can't engage them in a one on one talks. Now I think it's entirely too early. But I think once extreme leverage is put on them there may be an opportunity for some discussion. But right now they're not in a position where they're thinking rationally. I think on some of this stuff so I you know I wish I could give you like a good one two three step and plan on this. There really isn't. This is a very bad situation. And the thing that concerns me the most is if they get a significant nuclear capability and we don't have an option against them that's why it's important to to show the options we have every other country's going to say. If I get nukes I'm not going to get invaded. So I'm going to get nukes.

Axelrod: [00:45:55] Well and you know we already have seen the South Koreans talking about developing their own nuclear capacity because of fears that they may have to go it alone or and that's why it's

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THE AXE FILES

important to to reaffirm the nuclear umbrella that we have so that we don't have allies racing to the nukes to Russia. Obviously a point of contention at least between the White House and Congress and the intelligence community just for the umpteenth time. Do you have any doubt that Russia is trying to interfere in our election.

Kinzinger: [00:46:30] No doubt.

Axelrod: [00:46:31] Why is it so hard for the president to accept that?

[00:46:33] I don't know. I think you know part of it comes from a very prideful person I think it comes from. He thinks if he admits that somehow this will take away from his election I think he was elected because he spoke to people that felt disaffected and he won in states that we never imagined we could win. So I think he was legitimately elected as president but.

Axelrod: [00:46:53] He did pretty well in your district.

Kinzinger: [00:46:55] He did yeah. Yeah. And President Obama won in '08 in my district and Romney barely in '12 and President Trump won pretty substantially. But I think it's important this is not what I try to tell my Republican friends. I don't care who did or didn't benefit or who was attempted to be the beneficiary of Russian involvement because I guarantee you the Russians are going to turn against us. The Republican Party in two or four years. My concern isn't about 2018 and 2020. My concern is about the institution of democracy and the basic thing is as ticked off as pissed off as people get by Congress or by President. The one thing that keeps this whole thing together is the fact that people know they can vote and have a voice. And so when you basically say that an outside it's OK for an outside government to influence the way you think by creating fake news by propagating on Facebook and Twitter and everywhere else people begin to lose faith in the institution of democracy and that and I'm not been I'm not being dramatic in 10 or 20 years can lead to a really bad thing.

Axelrod: [00:47:59] Listen I'm I'm with you on this and we should point out it's not just here but Rush is active in trying to undermine all the Western democracies in the same way. What. What is your level of confidence that these probes that are ongoing both the congressional probe and the one that Mr. Muller is engaged in are are going to get to the bottom of whatever happened.

Kinzinger: [00:48:22] I feel pretty confident you know that the House probe has gotten very political and every time there's a meeting everybody runs to the cameras. The Senate has stayed very calm. In fact if there is if there is a press conference it's usually the two the Republican and Democratic Leader together and Mr. Mueller. He's a Republican by the way. He's he's a very good American. And I think he's going to get to the bottom of this and so on.

Axelrod: [00:48:46] What about what. What if the president tries to intercede and fire Mueller what would the impact of that.

Kinzinger: [00:48:54] Well as Lindsey Graham said I'll echo there will be holy hell to pay. And I think just as he mis interpreted or mis read people when he came to threatening to fire Sessions or attacking Sessions on Twitter I mean even people that don't like sessions were defending him at that point. There was massive backlash. I think if you fire sessions and then fire the independent counsel it would be backlash like he's never seen. This goes beyond politics this is as I've said just let the investigation happen. New news comes out and we'll comment on it and that's fine and good and everything but ultimately Mr. Mueller is going to say is going to find out the answers to this is going to present a report and we'll be able to go from there.

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THE AXE FILES

Axelrod: [00:49:37] What is the president's relationship with Republicans in Congress right now because in the last weekend he unleashed a bunch of tweets aimed at the Senate calling them saying they look like fools and losers. And you voted for a health care bill in the house that he at first celebrated and then called Mean helpful to you and let's not let's.

Kinzinger: [00:50:03] Not wonderful.

Axelrod: [00:50:04] So what is his relationship with the Congress.

Kinzinger: [00:50:08] Well if you ask me three weeks ago I said Actually I would have said really good. I've been to the White House twice. You know I was a president Trump critic. And you didn't. You didn't endorse. I didn't know. Why didn't you endorse him. Because I just didn't feel right about it at the time. You know with some of things coming out of it I didn't vote for Hillary. I just I wrote somebody an haven't said yet who I'm not going to but you know what better place disclose that. But I you know I've met with them twice in the White House and he's actually one on one really charming and I think he's actually a good negotiator I was dealing with him first in this health care issue and he was listening to concerns and seeing if he could fix it. So I think President Trump one on one is very different than Twitter or Trump. And the last three weeks though that the turn on session the you know the constantly talking about Republicans not as awesome but them. That's something I've noticed he's always like. They they they instead of us. The House voted to pass this repeal and replace. Regardless what your opinion is on it. The Senate came pretty darn close except for three senators and this like kind of unleashing is something that I think he needs to be careful because the point is popularity is not too high right now. And at the point people openly begin breaking with the president as every Presidents experience it makes life in the White House all that much harder.

Axelrod: [00:51:28] Reince Priebus is someone who is known to Republicans and help rebuild the party and was very and it was and is very close to Speaker. Paul Ryan is his dismissal another burden in that relationship.

Kinzinger: [00:51:45] I think it depends what comes next if General Kelly is able to really kind of gain control of messaging and gain control of access to the president so he's not distracted every minute then I think that will be a good change in terms of. So that's one thing. But in terms of kind of the public humiliation of Mr. Priebus the public humiliation of one of his most loyal guys Jeff Sessions. This is a big this is going to be hurtful in the relationship because a lot of people and I've talked kind of quietly to some folks that were huge Trump loyalists and still are and they're kind of wondering well what's the deal these guys were these guys.

Axelrod: [00:52:23] Sessions was the first major member of Congress to endorse Donald Trump. And Priebus though he may have been doubtful about Trump put the whole apparatus of the party line online. So there is a loyalty issue that that must occur to people.

Kinzinger: [00:52:44] That's right. Loyalty goes two ways. And while the president certainly has the right to fire anybody that's not serving kind of the administration and I support that right. He should do it in private and you shouldn't put it out on the public if you're going to fire. If we're going to fire the chief of staff Ryan how about you just call him in your office and say you should resign I think we need to go a different way instead of having these leaks out there you know the Scaramucci thing and everything else just publicly humiliate and a guy that's been extremely loyal. That's what makes me uncomfortable and not just for this moment but I'm scared to death that this way of doing business becomes what everybody who runs for president thinks they need to be and and we break down that professionalism of being president that the office is way bigger than the person.

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THE AXE FILES

Axelrod: [00:53:31] You talked to earlier about the fact that there are no black and white answers. That is not the Donald Trump way. That's not the fashionable view in our politics today it's not the sort of conservative talk radio industry view and so on how how comfortable do you feel right now in in in politics and in your place in politics.

Kinzinger: [00:53:58] I feel comfortable. I mean it's it's tough it's the toughest You know frankly I guess the last couple of years have been some of the most difficult years in politics and I've been in governance is hard. And and you know now you have to fight kind of both folks on your side of the aisle as well as the other side. That's not just an opposition opposition's easy. He can be opposed to anything. But it's a difficult time but it's almost to me to an extent reinvigorating to because there's nothing more satisfying than standing for like truth and what you believe in I don't mean that because there are black and white things in politics I think but also like there's right and wrong there's in terms of your behavior in terms of what you can say and what you should say. And so you know at a time when it's popular to scream and yell and call somebody names and put them down and say that they're bad people to not be that which I'm sure I've made that mistake plenty of times but I try not to be. I try to talk professionally about politics try to bring a good tone back into politics. That's actually reinvigorating that's kind of the idea of standing not alone but seemingly alone.

Axelrod: [00:55:03] When you when you call out the Club for Growth Freedom Works some of the radio and TV personalities and so on what kind of blowback do you get and what kind of threats do you get. Because you two face primary election.

Kinzinger: [00:55:22] Well you get blowback and you know it's it's. But I don't want to live in fear of that. This job is not overly fun. I mean I believe in what I'm doing but it's not like you wake up every day and it's like go into the merry go round you have a great time. I believe in it. I'm invigorated. Lots of times you go around around and you say yes maybe maybe the merry go round wasn't the best example but you know you look at that and you say but I'm here because I want to take a stand and do what's right and and sort of call out these kind of caustic voices on both sides of the aisle. Democrats are going to have the same issue now with kind of the rise of these extreme left groups. We we've we've fought with this too. And I just show people to tell people Look if you're bold and you believe what you believe and you're clear about it and you're willing to work together with people I think people vote for you again and forgiving.

Axelrod: [00:56:17] You voted for that House health care bill that the president embraced and then an embrace and an embrace. And presumably part of the reason you did that was you knew it was going to go to the Senate and it probably wasn't going to be the final bill you voted for but the Senate couldn't come. They are the same issues within the Republican caucus that that you did. Is this where are we now on this because the president says Congress can do anything but keep voting on health care.

Kinzinger: [00:56:49] Well look the Senate's still in for a couple of weeks if they can come up with some magic solution to get to 50. Great. We'll go to conference and figure it out. I believe we have to start planning today for bipartisan fixes to this. If we can't repeal and replace I still am committed to repeal and replace. But at the same time seen what happened in the Senate. We have to be realistic. And the idea of let it collapse and watch the blaze burn. I don't like because these are real people's lives that are affected. And for me I'm a country first before party guy. And for me. People's lives when they're hanging in the balance. Terms of quality and health care that goes above party. So I'm committed to a repeal and replace and if they can come up with a bill great. Today no labels which I'm part of put out a bipartisan agreement to kind of help fix some of the problems we're having today. I think that's I think it's a worthy thing to try to begin to say are there areas we can agree. In the event that this fails the repeal and replace because it appears that it has.

Axelrod: [00:57:51] And do you think that that the leadership would allow that to move forward?

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THE AXE FILES

Kinzinger: [00:57:56] It'll be hard. You know I don't know. I think at the point we think or realize that a repeal and replace effort is dead and there's no other option than I think there is no other option as.

Axelrod: [00:58:07] The president seems to be signaling that he wants to collapse the exchanges by withholding subsidies and so on.

Kinzinger: [00:58:15] And I am profoundly uncomfortable with the idea of watching something collapse because again there's real people that are affected by it. And if we can explore ways where Republicans can get some Democrats can get some and improve the current health care system so people are treated better. Amen. If there is no way to do that then I think these things will probably collapse anyway.

Axelrod: [00:58:38] Final question is about you and your future where literally six weeks or something away from when the filing starts in Illinois. I've heard you talk about your concerns about the system about where politics is today. You say it's not particularly fun. Are you entirely committed to running again for your seat?

Kinzinger: [00:59:06] Well I am. We always take or I always personally say that kind of like right about now in September. Before you run it to yourself and your district to think this through. So that's what we all do. I think it's an opportunity to in the middle of this kind of caustic environment though to make a difference. And so while I'm always evaluating because I told on my very first race I told everybody I go look the moment I don't think I'm the best person to serve you is that that's my last term so I am committed and owe it to people to do that. But my intention today is to absolutely do this again.

Axelrod: [00:59:42] Adam Kinzinger. I appreciate you, brother.

Kinzinger: [00:59:45] Any time.

Axelrod: [00:59:45] We don't we don't agree on some stuff, but I never doubt that you do put your country first.

Kinzinger: [00:59:53] And I you.

Axelrod: [00:59:53] And I appreciate.

Axelrod: [00:59:54] And I you, too. I really appreciate it.

Unidentified Speaker: [00:59:59] Thank you for listening to the X Files part of the CNN Podcast Network for more episodes of The X-Files visit CNN.com/slash/podcast and subscribe on iTunes stitcher or your favorite app. And for more programming from the University of Chicago Institute of Politics visit politics.uchicago.edu.