

THE AXE FILES

Ep. 231 – Major Garrett

David Axelrod: [00:00:00] MAJOR GARRETT Good to see you.

Major Garrett: [00:00:02] Great to see you David

David Axelrod: [00:00:03] Fellow podcaster

Major Garrett: [00:00:04] Yes indeed. It's the wave of the future. It really is.

David Axelrod: [00:00:07] It's shocking to me actually that people make the time for podcasts. And in a sense what I really like about it is that we've been told again and again that sort of rat tat tat bite sized stuff you know that's all people can tolerate. I think people are sort of rebelling against.

Major Garrett: [00:00:31] They are, they are evolving rebelling and adapting and laugh and tell people what I love so much about my podcast "The Takeout" is it shatters the false compression of television news, the false compression of television news is... And you and I lived this life. I would talk to you for 15 minutes on camera, seven seconds would show up on the air and I would say to myself there's seven minutes of other things that are fascinating that are really important that there's no room for and because the next day

David Axelrod: [00:01:02] And I would say that's 15 minutes of my life I'll never get back.

Major Garrett: [00:01:05] Precisely precisely. So many people have said that after meeting me. So podcasts break all of that though.

David Axelrod: [00:01:13] Yeah.

Major Garrett: [00:01:13] And people love my show and I sure I'm sure they love this show because it's the entire conversation.

David Axelrod: [00:01:19] Yeah well conversation is good. So let's start this one by just taking you back to San Diego where you grew up both your folks who worked for AT&T. Your mom was an engineer.

Major Garrett: [00:01:34] Yes without a college education. So interestingly for my mother she started as a phone operator as almost every woman did back in the 50s at that time becoming pregnant was a fireable offense. So as soon as you were you were announced to be pregnant you were fired and you were not given your job back. Now my mom went back to work three times after that all three of us were born. I was a third child in our family. So she always got her job back. After me she stayed and became adept enough as a phone operator to get attention. She moved up into low level engineering and then slightly in a progressive mentality AT&T said you know you have real promise we'll send you to our schools in Morristown, New Jersey, near the Bell Labs where they trained all their engineers. So without a college education my mother became a long distance engineer and when she retired after 42 years was in charge of every long distance call from Los Angeles to Arizona. And that is something I will always be proud.

David Axelrod: [00:02:29] Yeah that's admirable story.

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Major Garrett: [00:02:31] So I grew up with the greatest advantage of anyone my age could have a mother and a father who walked out the door every day carrying a briefcase each. So I was utterly and completely nonchalant about working in a world where women were powerful, strong, and capable. That didn't intimidate me or frustrate me in any way and I've always said it's the greatest advantage I've ever had in my work life.

David Axelrod: [00:02:52] I should ask you where did the Garret's come from originally.

Major Garrett: [00:02:57] So all I know I don't know a lot about my family history on my father's side. He grew up in Baytown Texas. He migrated to California didn't speak a lot about his family in Texas. I never knew any of my relatives in Texas. Both of his parents had died long before I was born. I think his mother died shortly after I was born. So I don't know a lot about that family history I know a lot more about my mother's side of the family, the Andersons, Moline Illinois and the Seefelds.

David Axelrod: [00:03:21] Illinois

David Axelrod: [00:03:22] And Iowa, Swedish immigrants both Swedish and German. Most of my people on my mother's side are Swedes who migrated to Moline, Illinois. My paternal grandfather. I've seen the registration papers at Ellis Island new signature like so many Swedes. He got on a boat came through Ellis Island got on a train was told to sit on the train until someone got on the train and screamed two words: John Deere. He didn't speak a word of English but he knew John Deere was. So he sat on a train from New York to Moline, Illinois. Someone got on the train and said John Deere and he got up and got off.

David Axelrod: [00:03:54] And worked at the John Deere factory.

Major Garrett: [00:03:56] Absolutely.

David Axelrod: [00:03:58] So your own childhood. I read somewhere that you that your interest in journalism manifested itself in a weird way where a friend had a typewriter in a garage.

Major Garrett: [00:04:15] Well so I was born in 1962. You can't be a child of that era and not be captured by the news of the world that was happening around that same year I was 6 years old in 1968. Two assassinations we were sent home from school both times. I really wasn't sure what was going on. Who these people were. But I knew something very big was happening. In addition I had two cousins fighting in Vietnam really fighting one in the infantry and artillery. I remember packing boxes for my two cousins sending them off with my mother

David Axelrod: [00:04:48] Did they get back?

Major Garrett: [00:04:49] They did. Both did and my other my one of my cousins Craig who's deceased and buried at Arlington National Cemetery went back for a second tour volunteered for a second tour and then stay in the Army. He was part of that junior corps of officers post Vietnam vet Norman Schwarzkopf and Colin Powell have written books about who looked at the Army after Vietnam and said this army is in very serious shape and if we leave it could fall apart. So these junior officers committed their careers to helping the Army stick together after Vietnam. And he's one of the great authentic heroes in my life. Craig Silcox buried at Arlington National Cemetery. So I became fascinated by the news. My parents took the San Diego Union Tribune and The Los Angeles Times a few families and neighborhood to do that were two incomes it was easier for that

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to happen. My parents got all three magazines too, all three.

David Axelrod: [00:05:42] And you read them?

Major Garrett: [00:05:42] I did. I won't say I read every word. But I was pretty I was pretty fascinated

David Axelrod: [00:05:47] I was the same way you know the newspaper. We lived in a housing development in New York newspaper would get dropped on the doorstep and just outside the door. First thing I would do when I woke up in the morning was run out there

Major Garrett: [00:06:03] Get the paper

David Axelrod: [00:06:03] And now I confess I read it from the sports section forward.

Major Garrett: [00:06:07] So did I. Box Fox scores first.

David Axelrod: [00:06:10] Exactly. Exactly.

Major Garrett: [00:06:12] That's how I learned my mathematics.

David Axelrod: [00:06:15] So and then I guess the moon landing was another big event.

Major Garrett: [00:06:19] How could it not be. I mean everything the moon landing, Watergate, Vietnam, all of it was just coming hurdling at us. And look I'm living in suburban San Diego. There's not a journalist in my family in any direction. No writers no reporters nothing like that. No one involved in politics but I was just taken by it and I remember vividly as a kid if there was a fire engine that screamed past the house I would always run outside and chase it. I want to either be at the tape line or just inside the tape line. That was sort of the theory I had about life. And so you go over to a friend's house and have an IBM celeb celebrity type. Why do they have that because his parents did something very unusual in the mid 70s they created a home business and they converted their garage into the basis of this home business. And so I'm over there on a sunny Sunday afternoon in San Diego which there are many who were supposed to go out and ride our skateboards of which there were many. And he shows me this room and I see almost lit up like Hollywood style this desk with this amazing machine on it a self-correcting electric typewriter. And you sat down and started churning out fake new fake new. Exactly. Some would say I've done that my entire career but now I know why I made up stories.

[00:07:37] I would I would say to myself all right. Make up a Washington dateline about the Ford administration. So I would have an all capital letters. WASHINGTON President Gerald Ford today did and I would just make five or six graphs take it out and write another story. I mean are your friends waiting to go skate. And I would have because what is what is wrong with you. That's his only sentence. And it's a very apt question what is wrong with you. And I thought to myself I've lost track of time. I've loved nothing more than pounding out these imaginary stories about this place in Washington and a president that I don't know anything about. Maybe they're on to pay attention to this. And when you went to high school you became editor of The News newspaper not the full editor editor the front page the most important news section of the paper and I worked on a page that would be exactly yeah. And one of the things I did which you might find interesting is I tried to take the front page outside of the high school. So I spent six months trying to get an interview with Mayor Pete Wilson. I would never give me an interview. Never. But you did get his chief of staff I

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got his chief of staff. Boss Yes and I also interviewed the chairman of the County Board of Supervisors a guy named Roger Hedgecock and then became mayor. You still have those pieces. I can find them yes but that was my whole did they commit news in any grand sense.

[00:08:54] But my goal was to take the Madison High School. James Madison we were the warhawks of the paper was called the Talon. Pretty clever I thought yes and brought the mayor the chief of staff of the city of San Diego to the front page and they were kind of annoyed but also intrigued by this irrepressible knucklehead who wouldn't take no for an answer. So when when irrepressible knuckleheads decide that it's on colleges. Yeah you ended up at the University of Missouri because of the journalism because of the journalism school was the best decision ever made in my life. The most important four years of my life I had figured out by then. Growing up in San Diego very close to paradise on planet earth and very placid and very comfortably middle class that really wasn't preparing me and did not prepare me for understanding what life in America was about. If I ever aspire to be a writer in America which I was aspiring to be even at that tender age I had to get out of San Diego. Not that I don't love it and not that there's not a great deal to love family there. No I don't. I have some couple of friends. My son is a student at the University of San Diego and I get back as often as I can but I knew that that was not the place and only the place to build a career as a writer. So I had to get out and going to the Midwest going to University of Missouri going to that great great journalism school. First in the world as we'd like to say their first and best yeah.

[00:10:20] Well working at the University of Chicago I can grant you that because there is no journalism school. But Northwestern would give us around where they were. They would complain about it but that's their problem it's their problem not mine. But so what. Tell me about that experience. Because you weren't you had deficiencies as a reporter and you had a drill sergeant from professors who forced you to confront those certainly. So it was not my mother's idea that I go so far away from home. My parents had gotten divorced when I was in 10th grade. There was a lot of instability there. It was important for me that was that I should ask you was that I mean I went through a similar thing yeah that the parents got divorced and my father broke down. It was very difficult. It was a very tough stretch of time my junior and senior year in high school and there was a big part of me that were you alone or did you have siblings or siblings but they're much older. My brother's five years older. My sister's eight years. They were out of the house when I was from my mom and all of us are ourselves Yeah. And it was very difficult. And there was a part of me that wanted to get away from that to strike out on my own and put some distance between myself and that experience. And that was a big part of the pull for university Missouri for me. Not only the J school but getting that distance and getting some separation. Yeah.

[00:11:48] So my mom said well sure you can go as far away from school but of course you want to be a broadcaster right. I said no I want to be a newspaperman. Well you're going to be a broadcaster because I want to watch you on television and she said and since I'm the finance director of this operation that's really what I want you to do. I said OK mom so I get a good talker back then. Very good talker. Much better talker than writer and a much better talker than Spellar and I'm still a much better talker than I am a speller. But yeah I competed in speech contests and I gave the graduation address to an elementary school and junior high school and so it was a very good talker and that's why mom wanted to have me do so when I go to school at the University of Missouri. I don't work for the student newspaper or the Maneater. I work at the student radio station. I become assistant news director. One of the people who reported to me Elizabeth Vargas. Oh no kidding. True fact. That's just a fact but a true fact is one of my journalism professors. And so I take my first semester of broadcast journalism in the journalism school and I discover I hate it I hate everything about it. The false compression the mechanics the wires the mechanics were probably more diff much more

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cumbersome and clumsy and heavy against everyone's advice. And I mean everyone's advice I quit broadcasting and switch over to newspapering well for two years I'd been writing broadcast copy all capitalized phonetically spelled radio copy and the first class I have to take is basic AP style newspaper writing.

[00:13:21] I'm a complete failure. I don't know the style book. I don't type. I keep typing in all caps while phonetically it's all my brain is completely missed wired and I'm on a trajectory to fail that class. You have a professor how little Lyster. Yes. Who takes my pleadings somewhat seriously but not too seriously. He said look you're on it you're going to fail. So there's nothing I can do about there's really nothing you can do about it. I said No no that's not the conversation we're going to have a different conversation and the conversation is is there anything else I can do. He said all right I'll give you this if you put on my desk at 9:00 o'clock every Monday morning. Three separate stories on the three Sunday shows so Meet the Press Face the Nation at that time this week with David Brinkley. Oh yes. Yeah Aspe on my desk at 9:00 a.m. every Monday morning all three every week from now till the end of the semester. I'll reconsider as long as you make progress. Getting better at AP style and all the other rigors of this class we'll have a conversation about it's the end of the semester. I've got a solid C I've now pulled myself out of failing. But I said Professor Lister. I can't take home to see if I've seen a newspaper class. My mom will say the experiments over back to broadcasting. I said you've got to believe in me. You have to take a risk.

[00:14:41] I've shown you everything I can show you but you've got to believe that there's some passion this kid and this work. It did. It did. I was. It was. It's like politics. It sounded like spin but I believed it. And he was true to me yeah it was for my best interest so it sounded like spin but it was true to me and the hard bitten old journalism professor somehow recognized that he did and he never he never gave me the answer he said or did you. I don't know if he's still around or not he's passed away. But I let him know. Yes and I let him know over the years how very vital he was and remains in my life because without that be he sent home maybe I can continue. And the experiment goes on. I'm curious because you've sat in the Sunday show chair from time to time what you learned watching those Sunday shows back in the day. The most important part of the Sunday show format to me and it's pretty clear now that I'll I'll I have reached the end of my Sunday show format experience. Is that the guest should feel honored to be there with you. You should not feel honored that they're sitting there with you. OK. So don't be cowed Don't be cowed. But don't be disrespectful but understand that this is a place where news can and should be made. And it's the requirement of the host to constantly reinforce that understanding. This is a big stage and this is a big moment and these questions are serious and the answer is better be serious.

[00:16:23] You know it's interesting because in the day when you were writing about that you know you think of a David Brinkley who was you know a legend in broadcasting. So that message was implicit. You're sitting there with David Brinkley right. So you'd better bring your A game actually. But there aren't that many there aren't there aren't these figures in journalism anymore. You know we elevated a whole generation or two of broadcasters who were sort of iconic figures. That's not the case anymore and look at a very credible argument could be made that was an outsized icon making time. And we sort of elevated people and oversimplified and over homogenized news in this country to possibly our detriment. An argument could be made a critical academic argument could be made. It also simplified things and it gave people a sense of place. DAVID I don't know how often you get this question but I get this all the time. Where should I get my news. What should I believe. It's a very hard question to answer. Yeah I don't have. We had we had no you know we had a variable. We had a hierarchy and we had limited number of outlets and everybody heard the same conversation. These people were invested with a great deal of trust. Walter Cronkite David Brinkley and when the network news channel has turned its attention toward something it was a way of

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telling the country this matters and then the hierarchy of our news making decisions this is now a thing that was slow to happen on Vietnam.

[00:18:02] It was slow to happen on civil rights but once it did Walter Cronkite coming back from Vietnam and casting doubt on the effort was what did LBJ say when you've lost Walter Cronkite as a country right and things began to change dramatically after that. We don't have that kind of pillar of journalistic rectitude anymore we don't have that person who embodies we have people who embodied in certain political perspectives. If you talk to lawmakers they'll say most influential people in my party have had some Republicans time with us even on my podcast most important Republicans aren't even in Congress. They're not lawmakers at all. Now they're talking head there. Yeah. They are the ones right who drive the politics in my district in my state and in my cloakroom. Yeah and they think to themselves that's probably ought not to be the way it is. Yeah yeah. I want to talk to you about this a little bit more down the line but I don't want to lose your own story here. You are one of the one of the storied figures at the University of Missouri Journalism School was its founding founding dean Walter Williams who wrote something called the journalists creed. And you still keep that. I do. So there were two bookstores at the University of Missouri and at one of them the one right across Mellis library right in the center of campus campus university bookstore was called and it's closed now. Members soon after getting into the journalism school which was kind of a stretch for me had a very mixed success my first two years in college so I just eked my way in.

[00:19:49] You needed a two point seventy five GPA at two point seventy seven and when I say eked I mean down to the second one hundredth of a great point average I said I'm in. So I need to get a accrete I need to get the cream so I have it with me. And so like all stories at that time and still stay a little semi fake wood frame. Got the thing tucked that in there. It's been on my desk everywhere I've worked every job I've had my entire career. I'm not going to read the whole thing because it's a it's a stout statement of mission that really lays forth the notion of journalist journalism as a public trust. Yes but journalism is also a business. And I want to ask you about that. But in keeping with the question we're going to take a short break. We'll be right back with Major Major Garrett You know I think about this a lot because you know I started in journalism and I was raised in journalism and I believe in journalism and I believe in the journalist's creed. But what we we have such fierce competition today. You know when I started in journalism there was this hard wall between the newsroom and the business side. Absolutely and if the business guys came in the editors would throw them out. Right. But that's that that's long gone now. And now there's this fierce competition for readers for eyeballs for tweets for for all of this. And so you know how do you reconcile the the journalist's creed with the businesses need it is so difficult. It is a literary that's really good. Beautifully fank you just rendered it just happened right here. The magic just happened right here.

[00:21:46] As is often the present day. It's the hardest question for the industry to answer in the end it has come up with incomplete answers for now going on two decades. Two give a short history of how community journalism has collapsed as a financial model. Think about it this way. For those of you in the audience old enough to remember classified advertising that's how you sold your old golf clubs your old stereo the begonias the pet the puppies whatever three lines of agate type 15 20 dollars. Every newspaper and every community bank that revenue all the time because the only huge source of 35 to 40 percent for most community newspapers. People ask me all the time did the Internet kill newspapers. No no Craigslist and eBay did and no newspapers adapted at a community level. All of this technology they could have they might have harnessed that and brought that all in but they never did. So you ask yourself what business model can survive within a course of two to three business years you lose 35 to 40 percent of your revenue. Answer zero. They can't function

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the way they had. And you can't get away from the fixed costs of printing presses trucks. Gasoline 80 percent of the costs are in coppicing and deliver exactly newspaper precisely. And when you lose that revenue source you lose reporters you lose editors you lose a sense of mission you lose ambition and you lose the psychology of the idea. Of a resource for a community. Yeah and.

[00:23:18] And all those things have diminished in the last 20 years and the chasing of revenue to try to compensate for that has been largely futile. Most newspapers are a shell of their former selves. Yeah shells of their former selves used started in Amarillo Texas apropos newspaper at a time when they were probably a little more robust. Sure. Yeah yeah. So I was an Amarilla from 1984 86 in Las Vegas Review Journal from 86 to 88. JOHN RALSTON The outstanding journalist of all of our legends. One of my dear Havanna political career and creating a new model of newspapering on digital platform called the Nevada independent. And then I went to the Houston Post and I left the Houston Post to go to work for the Washington Times and Washington. All my friends in the Houston Post said that paper's going to fold before the post. I said no it's not. The Post will fold before the Washington Times and it did. Why. Because it was up against Houston Chronicle and The Chronicle had the classifieds and it was the star. What you talk about the Houston Post. Yes I suppose that's what you meant the Washington Post No no no. Yeah the Houston Post was going to fold before before the Washington Times and it did let me back you up a second. Amarillo your first job everybody's first jobs in journalism are formative job. Absolutely. Tell me what that job did for you. I was a cop reporter All right. And that meant getting up at 4:00 in the morning getting into the NEWSROOM at 5:00.

[00:24:50] We had an afternoon edition and a Morning Edition called 30 County Sheriff's Office is every morning to find out if anything happened check the police blotter anything whether traffic accident homicide rape burglary anything fire all fell under my journalistic jurisdiction. And that's the best training for any kind of reporting imaginable because any error can not only hurt people can insult people and can get you in a legal process. And you have to be absolutely precise. You have to double check and triple check everything. You also have to be censored and you have to be sensitive to reveal these. These things are not just stories but they're there they're often traumatic events in people's lives. I remember when I was a young reporter because I had a blessedly I had a great city editor who said I know you love politics. We put you on it right. I remember being on the night police and disaster beat and calling the survivors of a victim of a homicide. And they had not been told yet. They did not know I had. I informed them that their loved one had and it was the most painful awful thing. And you know I you what you learn from these beads is that this may be your story for the day. This is a life changing experience for someone. I've been asked many times what's the most important story you've ever covered. And I always tell them the same thing. It was in Amarillo Texas Sunday afternoon that was when the event happened. The story I wrote happened on a Monday. Sunday afternoon parents are driving home through a small residential community in Amarillo. There's a traffic backup. They're inching along to their home. They see that there has been an accident of some kind that police vehicles.

[00:26:48] And then there's the crumpled bike that they drive by which they recognized to be their son's crumpled bike. He was killed by a drunk driver on a Sunday afternoon. I come in the next day my city editor says you need to call this family because we're going to write a story about the boy I was 21 and a half years old. I said I don't want to call this family. So you're calling the family. I want a story now. And I remember sitting at my desk staring at that phone for the longest time looking up in the phone book having the number right in front of me and not knowing what to do. So I called and I'm sure my voice was shaking. I said I'm sorry ma'am I don't mean to trouble you but I've been asked to write a story about your son. So our community can know who he was. And she proceeded to tell me and they sent over some pictures and I wrote a story. Six months later I'm

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at the police department and I'm in the PIOs Office of Public Information Officers office and a woman walks by says Are you Major Garrett. And I said Yes ma'am. She said I'm so-and-so and she says the last. The boy's last name which I don't remember it was six months later. She said I'm the mother of the boy you wrote about and I didn't know what she was going to do next. I literally did not know what she was going to do next. She says Well you know that's the only thing that's ever happened about that.

[00:28:14] That gave me any peace. That's so nice. We sent that story all across the country to all of our friends and family. Thank you for taking note of the 7 year old life my boy lived and letting our community know who he was and what he dreamed to be. Yeah I've never forgotten that. It may sound to some people sappy and Modlin I've never forgotten that story never forgotten that story. Because when we do our job right we can do it well. These things are possible. You can take a very difficult situation and treat Well it's natural curiosity. You know what I realized late in life is you know stories are what it's all about and being able to tell stories faithfully sensitively and accurately and get everything right and make sure you don't take any shortcuts and just treat that as if it's about your life. Now what would you want the seriousness to be treated about your life story. And I've tried never to forget that. So tell me about the transition to Washington and what did you. Were you always headed that way. That was my big goal. Yes as fast as I could get to Washington to see if I could hack it. I wasn't sure if I could. I was pretty doubtful actually. That's why I took the job of the Washington Times an enormous risk enormous risk. If I had understood at the time what a great risk it was I never would have. Why was it so risky. Because the Houston Post at the time was the 14th largest newspaper in the country.

[00:29:40] I was there after only four years of being a journalist. I did really well that was a great job as a general assigned reporter covering the biggest stories hurricanes plane crashes earthquakes was on the front page all the time won several awards. I was doing great and I leave that paper to go for the unification church backed Washington time the the conservative rag of Washington D.C. The Washington Post wouldn't even use to scrape the mud off its shoes. And now that you put it that way that was nuts. It was it was insane. But the whole my whole point was I had to get in that press room covering Congress as soon as I possibly could. So I Ravager out to age 27 maybe 27 1/2. Now that's very common now. I don't need to tell you that political reporters arrive on campaigns at much younger ages now than they did back then but that was like a oddity on more outlets. And these kids are cheaper much much cheaper. So there was a big risk. But I started covering Congress having never covered a city council before let alone a state legislature. It was an enormously difficult transition. I had a learning curve that was as steep as I've ever encountered in my life. Did that through the 94 election cycle but got to know the politics of House and Senate races pretty well.

[00:30:59] You were there at a momentous time because right through the Gingrich revolution revolution which I wrote a book about looking back on it ten years later called the enduring revolution one of the better books I would argue about that period of time learned a lot about politics rose to deputy national editor and had a career that was locked in. Then I quit to write my second book and I'm not work there anymore. I wanted to see if I could do something else. And I went to U.S. News and World Report. And then I thought I had reached the absolute apex of my career. The one time that I was the first time rather that I was at U.S. News and World Report and Michael Barone knocked on my door and asked me a question about politics. I literally said to myself I mean yeah this is on the encyclopedia right. He asked me a question about politics I'm like All right I don't need to accomplish anything more in life. I've topped out. I'm I'm totally good. But there was more. But you know after your momentous decision that you didn't want to be a broadcaster. Yeah. You go to CNN correct. Why my interesting story. It's just payback to your

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mom for the investment. No. So is somewhat well known. I'm divorced my first wife was in television. She was actually offered a job by Frank Sesno to cover the White House. She turned it down quite to my surprise. And then Frank Sesno said well he was the bureau chief of CNN at the time who should I hire said I don't know. I just turned the job down. I'm not going to tell you to hire. He said Well let me ask you a different question. Who's the best reporter you know. She's my husband. Who is that. MAJOR GARRETT What's his number.

[00:32:46] What are you talking about. He says look I'm out. I'm out of options. I'm going to find somebody for this job and if you don't want it I'm going call him and he did. And that's how I got into television just like that just like it was like the most colossal accident. I wasn't participating. I mean I wasn't agitating. I wasn't advertising myself as a future television reporter. I was completely content with my life at U.S. News and World Report. At that time late 1999. But it was. But it's also a mean going from print to television is a leap a huge leap. If I had to watch those live shots now I might go to the U.N. and alleged human rights violations although you covered. You were there at the White House last year of the Clinton administration. Yeah. And then I was covered the first year and a half of the Bush administration nine I was with him in Sarasota. I was with him on that fateful morning that day. None of us will ever forget. I sat down with David Gregory recently and he was recounting the recollections of of that day. Well we all have recollections of what we saw and how he couldn't believe what we saw. That's all very similar. The thing I've never forgotten and never will forget about that David is understanding that for those terrifying moments after the both airliners struck the Twin Towers the vast pyramid of information that a president possesses was collapsed and essentially for a few moments the United States and everyone else knew just about the same number of things.

[00:34:35] I've never lived through that experience before. I've never lived it since. But for those two or three hours when they're literally trying to assemble a coherent understanding of what this is what it was and what it might also represent the distance between the knowledge base of the present United States and someone living in Keokuk Iowa was about the same because I went to people and I said what is happening. What are we doing. What is going on. And they look back to me with a kind of resolute but nevertheless blank stare because they didn't know now and the dimensions of it seemed at at simultaneously manifestly and measurably invisibly horrible but also incalculable. No one knew of how many how many jets what other targets were other places. Is this Islamic induced or motivated terrorism is it something else is it nation state. And those terrifying hours anything seemed possible and I remember being live on the air and we were getting I was getting in my ear as a correspondent for CNN. The State Department had blown up. There was a huge explosion in the middle the National Mall. It turned out neither one of those things were true. But in those moments it sounded like it could be. So you know and they didn't know how widespread and pervasive this was. No. And as someone who's been in a White House that has had to endure crises that come in there is that moment where your your knees are buckling but you've got to solidify them you've got to put your knees beneath you and lock them in place so you can walk.

[00:36:19] It takes time and it took them a full day if not more on your knees and be able to walk. What You Did Was there a pool that went with him. Yes so I was not I was not in the pool that day. I was in the other classroom hold while he was in there reading the children's right. So I didn't see the look on his face. I didn't see Andy Card his chief of staff walked in and told them what had happened. Yeah. Yeah. How how did that change the White House. How did that change the White House press corps. I mean the Bush presidency was sort of meandering along right before that. It's it. Before that. The most important thing that this White House that hasn't been focused on. People forget this was stem cell. What was the regulatory policy going to be on stem cells and the White House wrapped itself around the axle for six weeks on stem cell policy. And then there was this big

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address that George W. Bush gave from the ranch about how you came down on it and how they all thought they perfectly threaded the difficult political needle. No Child Left Behind had been working through the process. There'd been some economic stuff but it was kind of not really moving anywhere rapidly and it didn't seem to have a force of and is particularly good. And I will tell you David this is I've mentioned this before.

[00:37:48] After the recount I think when you cover the American presidency and you're ever in the presence of the president you always have to worry about the worst possible thing happening because the American president is always a target. Right. You can never take that out of your mind if you're a reporter. You just can't. Right. Which is why you have protective pools. Right. Which is why we're always there. I worried about that more after the recount. I worried about that. I worried about the sense of division in the country and if the legitimacy of the presidency would be believed in a people some person didn't believe it was legitimate might strike out in a very violent way I was always worried about that. I was never worried about 9/11. I mean I just wasn't. And then that came at us and the idea of the country having to reconcile itself to this administration that would never for its entire time term in office and the next president and the current president escape that shadow escape that Specter. I felt it almost immediately that that we had entered a new era of warfare that would concentrate the national mind concentrate National Treasury concentrate the national security apparatus for a very long period of time and for any child. As my children 95 96 and 2000 as they frequently tell me dad we've never known a time when we were not at war. Yeah that's a big deal about him. It's a big deal for them and I have to be reminded of it sometimes. We'll be right back with Major Garrett. You said something a second ago about about the divisive nature of the recount in 2000 the election between Al Gore and George W. Bush.

[00:39:41] How big was that in this sort of evolution of the politics that we see today. Because obviously we become more more and more polarized and there are lots of reasons for it some of which have to go to social media cable television all of that stuff but how much traces back to that one event. I won't say all of it but a good portion of it does trace to that Supreme Court ending that election. Five to four vote Bush becomes president becomes president and then you have this idea this very real concept that every vote does matter. Yeah and that's why we saw a vast increased in 2004 turnout. People forget the 17 million more people participated in 2004 by casting ballots than did in 2000. John Kerry did an extraordinary job. He found seven and a half million more votes than Al Gore did. Highest for any Democrat in the history of the country probably a few more in Ohio. George Bush found nine million more but and you mentioned the recount in social media can you imagine what the recount would have been like had we had social media or lots of other lots of other things but the recount was a dividing line in the sense that the country felt like its systems its underlying processes weren't as well understood and upon scrutiny didn't look all that great. Right. And I think that created a psychological sense that maybe our systems aren't all that good or maybe. Well I also think that there was this sense that something certainly on the part of Democrats. But it started a cycle of suspicion about the system and legitimacy of institutions generally. Right.

[00:41:38] I think that we don't talk about it much but that was a big event and I think you know hobbled Bush throughout his presidency. Sure it hobbled Bush it brought into question not only his legitimacy but the sense of his own interaction and connection to the country. And that's a damaging thing. And I guarantee you George Bush wishes he would have won outright. Any president would have wished they had won outright. But when the fight was on they fought it and I would say there was another election by the way. Now we've seen another where the majority of the country voted one way and the result was another right in the Electoral College which and you know this that's the rule of the game. Yes. And you have to understand the rule the game to win the game. Yes. And I think I have no tolerance for people who say all college educated right. And and I

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have very little tolerance for people who say well that shouldn't be. Well it is although it's interesting before the last election. You know and you know this because you covered this that Donald Trump was the one seed he was he showing the doubts about. Yes. It's a it's rigged the system his electoral college is red and Democrats were saying we've got this blue wall the Electoral College offers us. And then shortly after the election Hillary Clinton called for the dissolution of the electoral college. Right. I mean the old saying where you stand depends on where you sit. So you made a speaking about where you stand and where you sit. You made a decision in 2002 to go over to Fox News.

[00:43:14] Why did you make that decision. Because I really admired Brit Hume and I really admired his approach to news and the news network at the time talked about fair and balanced and telling both sides and I wanted to give that a try a chance and I believed I could do that as long as Brit Hume was there and I was at Fox for eight years. Got most of the stories on the Democratic side of the political spectrum because I had established a reputation you coauthored a couple of books with tympanic Tenpenny a Democrat from southeastern Minnesota. And I was well known among Democrats well respected among Democrats. And so when the fox truck would roll up Democrats would say oh God who's that. Oh it's major. OK well that's fine. Fox understood that. Roger Ailes understood that I was a great asset for him in that sense and that I could write and produce and create really interesting stories. We first met in 2004 when you were working for John Edwards. Yes. You know that's one of our first encounters in New Hampshire. I was always covering the Democratic side whether it was Senate races House races or presidential campaigns. So it was a great experience for me. I make no apologies from my life at Fox. I was good for them. They were good for me. And when it ended it ended. Not asking you to make apologies for yourself or or them for that matter.

[00:44:50] But how do you assess the role that Fox has played that they've consolidated essentially the Republican side in that you know 50 percent of Republican voters say their primary news sources is Fox News and they have cleaved very close to this president. They have how much is Fox News news today and how much is it in Oregon for the president or does that divide into day parts. It's well it's harder to make those distinctions than it was when I was there. Far more the shows on Fox now are personality driven and far fewer a reporter or reportage driven. There was a better balance of that. There was a better distribution of reporters and reportage as opposed to opinion in personality. When I was at Fox that has shifted that ratio has shifted much more visibly to personality driven and editorial content driven at Fox and it has after a while during the Republican nomination process not being sure what it was going to do with Trump decided what to do with Trump and become a if not an advocate a certainly a perpetually sympathetic ear to the point of view of the administration a resource for the administration most of the people I see who speak for this administration. I only see one place Fox right. I have to watch it relentlessly because that's the only place they show up though we make repeated requests for interviews as does NBC as does ABC News to CNN as does MSNBC. But Fox gets the figures so I don't really think anyone needs me to sort of describe the fox role in the ecosystem around the Trump White House. It's pretty clear.

[00:46:49] It's as clear as can possibly be the president's Twitter account reinforces that where he shows up for phoners reinforces that where administration and the president start started their morning with their intelligence briefing. He starts it with Fox he starts with Fox and Friends right. And so that's all very very clear. It is a reality for Republicans it's a reality for the Trump administration. There are counter realities and we're seeing them manifest themselves in elections across the country special elections the governors election of Virginia where there is a reaction and in the media environment is their actions and counterreaction right. But the you know we talked

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earlier about the time when you know we had a national conversation. Right now we have these virtual reality silos where you really get one side of the story. And and you don't invite other points of view and in other words you're you have your opinions affirmed instead of informed. Not only that you get that through whatever you're watching on television and because the algorithms are created this way your social media feeds do exactly the same thing even if you're not watching cable news you are being fed because the algorithms want to please you. So and if you're if you're involved in consuming political news the algorithms will send you things that are more match your likes and read tweets. So you create your own silo and the algorithm builds the silo even higher for you. And what I tell people when I'm asked about this I say look I can't tell you what to do or what to read or how to read but I can give you one piece of advice from the time you wake up to the time you go to sleep at night.

[00:48:41] Everything you've consumed in terms of news whether it's on your social media feeds or what you read or what you watch leaves you feeling completely satisfied utterly reinforced and completely content. You're doing it wrong. Now you're doing it flat wrong. Now you are only baking in your own perspective of the world and the world is changing and the world as it changes need you to change along with it to be the most productive involved engaged citizen you can be if you care about that. And since you're consuming political news in theory you do care about that. But that's work. It's work. Yeah yeah. As the candidate you worked for you used to say you've got to get out of your comfort zone. Yeah. You know we talked earlier about the competition between journalism as a trust and business. I mean this is a good business model for for Fox you know appealing to progressives is a good business model for MSNBC. So the incentives are very much aligned with pursuing those kinds of agendas. Yes. And the problem I have with that is and I noticed this even when I was at CNN the crowding out of reporters and the crowding in of people who just talk who have a certain or even a vaguely informed analytical perspective now we don't even put professors on who actually have decent research and bodies of knowledge because they're not exciting enough. They're not pugilistic enough to have all these phony fights and all these trumped up forgive me. Argumentation and reporters find themselves watching people talk about what they were only allowed to report for a minute and a half in which they have 30 minutes of reporting they could offer their own legitimate reported perspective.

[00:50:40] But now we hand that over to semi informed analysts because that's somewhat easier or more convenient or more watchable television. I would actually much prefer and I have hazard a guess that our audience would prefer more informed long form critical journalism that tells them things on an ongoing basis. But those trend lines have long since over moved my theoretical notions of what ought to be or should be or would be profitable programming. Why did you leave Fox. I've been on cable news for ten years averaging on a given day 20 live shot today that treadmill had run me out. And as you well know nothing about. Well as you recall had gone through a very stressful period covering the Obama White House for a period of time. My network was assailed by the White House as a arm of the Republican Party. Now none. No one at the podium or in quotes given to the New York Times or The Washington Post ever said I was the problem right. But that was cold comfort for me collateral. I was the most visible editorial representative of that network who had to show up in that White House every single day. And that was without a doubt the most stressful period of my career because I wasn't as I've said before I wasn't a warrior for Fox and I wasn't at war with the Obama White House. I was just trying to serve the audience that relied on me every day to tell the most accurate penetrating and interesting story about the United States on that given day. That didn't mean it was without stress.

[00:52:26] It was enormously stressful and I had a meeting in your office where you said it's really not about you Major I said David that doesn't do me any good. Right. When I was wrung out by that

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to just that whole process and the tension of covering the Obama presidency and Fox was a part of the conversation my own mind but I really had I really exhausted myself on television and I wanted to see if I could find a place that would take me on as a writer and go back to the thing I love to do most in journalism which is right and National Journal came along and gave me exactly the right place to do that and it was a great move for me and I have no one single regret. Now you've resumed doing television in the restful reflective environment of the Trump White House. Congratulations man. I've made a great strategic. Yes. Yes. I mean CBS offered me at the end of the 2012 campaign a job I simply could not turn down. Chief White House correspondent for CBS News. That puts me in a pantheon of people who are legends and justifiable legends in our industry. I also want to see if I could do that if I could hack it. I guess I have and what. Tell me about. Tell me about this president and covering this president because we've never really seen anything like it. No we haven't. And it's a great challenge. It's a great experience. It's very exhausting. It's very exhausting.

[00:53:59] It's emotionally taxing because you never know what's going to come at you at any given moment and you have to be prepared every moment for literally anything. The secretary of state could be fired at any moment. The National Security Advisor could be fired at any moment. The FBI director can be fired at any moment and you have to be ready for that. And so you have to have this sense of emotional readiness that takes a toll. That's one part of covering the Trump presidency the other part of it is and I try to make sense of this in a book that I just finished writing which will be out in mid September small commercial here folks. Yes. Give us the title Mr. Trump's wild ride. I think it says it all. Yes. Yeah the first year the Trump presidency is one of the things I say in the book is it is a wild ride but that doesn't necessarily mean it's all bad. A wild ride can be thrilling can be fun. It can make you throw up. It could also make you really happy. And it happened and what I try to do in the book is explain the things that happened in that first year that are likely to have the most long reaching consequence. I have a whole chapter on deregulation for example not the most sexy topic about this earlier.

[00:55:08] Before we started recording the there's a lot going on that's pretty profound terms of the appointment of judges terms of deregulation or federal circuit judges appointed and confirmed in the first year in the history of the American presidency and a Supreme Court Justice confirmed and a means by which if there are future vacancies the president will fill those with justices who reflect his very conservative approach to jurisprudence. That's a big deal long ranging. And I go into great detail in the book about how the idea of this list came about. It was a genuine political innovation that Trump deserves some credit for putting on a list as a potential nominee. No one has ever done that before. I explained in pretty elaborate detail what the genesis of that was why it might matter how it might influence Republican candidates long after Trump. I have a whole thing on why health care failed. Why it is an enduring part of the Obama legacy. Why on immigration policy when you say health care failure to get the repeal repeal of it right. This concerted effort although still hacking away away right. Precisely. But there are big structural lift fell out of itself and I try to explain why the tax reform the tax cuts all those things so there's a great deal that catches the public's eye about this president constantly relentlessly and yet parts of government move on and they are L'Est sifted than they would be under another president. I think part of that is just because of Trump's personality his sense of constantly churning everything in the media environment. The other part of it is strategic. If you're looking over here you're not looking over their and if you're not looking over there there's things that can happen. There's always that question about Trump which is how much is strategic and how much is impulsive. I don't know but he does know because his impulses are who he is. Yeah I often tell him he believes very much in his own instincts and he acts on them.

[00:57:19] Yes. And whether it's firing someone or picking up his phone and tweeting something.

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And as importantly must be hard to work for. Yes he is hard to work for. Can't imagine actually as someone who worked in the White House. It wears people down. It really does because they don't know how. I mean there is a small there are small number of people who have been around Trump long enough who know how to weather these storms and know how to sort of gauge just how mad he is or what he's likely to do. But there is a whole other realm far larger realm of people who don't in fact that their coterie worn down has been shrunken. But there have been a lot of leaks out of the White House more than I think I can remember. Yes. Why. Because there are rivalries there are turf battles and this is not a cohesive team it never has been a cohesive team. One of the things that I learned watching the campaign that you were involved in with President Obama was not only were you a cohesive team. You were a reinforcing team. I mean you all believed the same thing and believed on behalf of the same person. Right. It was. I'm sure you've said this. It had to fill remarkable and I did feel completely different. Yeah that's why it was such a terrible prelude for me covering the Trump press because they're not cohesive they're not locked in arms. They don't have a central set of beliefs. Half the people who work for the president don't believe in his trade agenda.

[00:58:55] I mean flat out don't believe in it. Some of them don't believe in his national security agenda. That's a big problem. And they know strategically that we will take as reporters any point of friction about Trump at all policy frictions in the Obama even the Bush era. We like oh maybe I get one reporter interested who maybe I get one little story out there any part of friction for Trump. Everyone will take and everyone will jump on and everyone will salivate over because he is this outsized persona. He checks for boxes that we've never had checked before by an American president. He's a celebrity in his own right. Preexisting he's a billionaire preexisting he's a TV star. Separate from his celebrity status and he's a social media phenomenon and he's a president. Five boxes. Yeah. And because of that he has an intensity of coverage and an intensity of fascination that far outstrips any person who's previously occupied that presidency at least in my lifetime. Do you think he has been. I have to end it with this question but he constantly complains about his coverage and that he has been treated fairly. Do you think he's been treated unfairly. I think the scrutiny is so intense but he invites so much of that intense scrutiny himself. Fair or unfair. He would like more credit for the economy. Guess what Bill Clinton wanted more credit for the economy before the 94 midterms. Yeah George Bush wanted more credit going into the 2004 re-election with John Kerry which was very difficult for not being a terror.

[01:00:35] And I think there are plenty of people around President Obama heavy lifting to get us to the point where he could hand off a growing economy growing and stabilize the economy. Absolutely President Obama would like more credit for that man. No American president I've ever covered believe they received sufficiently nuanced credit for all the things that they accomplished. The presidency is sort of like that. You're thinking about all the fires you're putting out and problems you're solving. There's only so many headlines in any given specialty when you're starting fires right. And the president does and some of the stories he denounces are stories he felt he fed himself. I guarantee you when Maggie Haberman was attacked by Trump on Twitter for saying his legal team was terrible I guarantee you Trump gave that story and then denounced it because he churns it and it was true. Everything Maggie wrote was true. It turned out to be true. Two or three weeks later. But that's one of the things that happened with Trump. Right. He spouts off says something you report it says that's not true. Well it may not be true that minute but it eventually becomes true. We've been reading the H.R. McMaster's story for six months finally withdrew. Now it's so odd to live in that environment where you can do really hard aggressive reporting and have really good sources. I've said this before.

[01:01:50] You can have five incredible sources really tapped in connected people and be 100 percent right on a Trump story and all that's wrong because he'll make it he'll completely go the

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other direction because he was feeding somebody in a Mr. action move or he'll just change his mind. Well Major Garrett the wild ride continues. Good to be with you. Thank you David.