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# THE AXE FILES

## The Axe Files - Ep. 120: J.D. Vance

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[00:00:00] UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: And now, from the University of Chicago Institute of Politics and CNN, "The Axe-Files" with your host, David Axelrod.

DAVID AXELROD, "THE AXE FILES" HOST: If ever there was a timely book, it's Hillbilly Elegy by J.D. Vance who grew up around Appalachia and in working-class Ohio and lived many of the challenges that are common to folks in that region. J.D. recently shared his stories and his very, very insightful observations at the Institute of Politics, and right here.

J.D. Vance, welcome. You know, they say everything in life is timing. So, you wrote a book, a memoir of your life growing up in and around Appalachia. And, it was an incredible journey. Now, every elite in the country looks at you as sort of Margaret Mead or their Sherpa to lead them through this world that they don't understand, that Donald Trump obviously did.

J.D. VANCE, AUTHOR, "HILLBILLY ELEGY": Sure.

AXELROD: And we'll talk about him and all of that. But, the book itself apart from the timing is a beautiful book. And it's an incredible story. And so, I want to start there, and then just ask you a little bit about how you grew up and how you got from there to here as a Yale educated lawyer and now Sherpa for the elites.

VANCE: Sure. Well, the story in my mind really starts in Eastern Kentucky, the 1940s when my grandparents get married and moved to the north of Rust Belt, Ohio, what we now call the Rust Belt but then it was the land of opportunity. And they just wanted a better life for themselves. They were very poor in Eastern Kentucky. And so, they were able to raise a family on a single wage. They definitely --

AXELROD: In Ohio?

VANCE: In Ohio. Things were pretty chaotic. I mean, they definitely brought with them a lot of the habits they'd acquired from being incredibly poor, growing up with the mountains. And so, they didn't fit in quite as well. Their family life was pretty chaotic.

AXELROD: What were those habits?

VANCE: Well, you know, they grew up in just -- they were used to struggle. And they were used to not necessarily living their life in a way that was that was surrounded by material comfort. And so, they didn't necessarily know how to adjust that well to having money. They didn't -- you know, they didn't fit in especially well in their communities. And their family life was pretty chaotic and pretty traumatic.

I mean, even back in the '30s and '40s when things went pretty well for them and their family, still there was a lot of violence, a lot of alcoholism. My grandma's -- grandfather had famously killed a local political rival in the county. And so, there were a just a fair amount of, I think, emotional baggage that they brought with them and just the fact that they were a 16 and a 13-year-old who'd moved north to escape their family because their family wasn't too happy about

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the fact that my grandma was pregnant.

AXELROD: At 13?

VANCE: At 13. And she had the baby at 14. It didn't survive, but goes to show how different every time it was.

AXELROD: And what happened in Ohio? How did that unravel?

VANCE: Well, the -- it unraveled slowly. So, they had three kids. And the first kid, I think, was raised in a relatively stable environment. Things were still pretty chaotic, but he looks back on it pretty fondly. But by the time their two younger kids came along, things were really rough. My grandfather was drinking a lot. My grandmother really wasn't able to take care of the home and the way that she was used to.

And so, my mom and my aunt really grew up in a very chaotic, very traumatic home. And, the lesson in some ways of that life, I think, is that you don't necessarily forget everything that you learned when you were growing up just because you maybe have a little bit of material comfort.

And so, what happened is, at the same time that my mom and my aunt were starting to go through adulthood and just like my grandparents had not forgotten every lesson of the way they grew up, the industrial economy in Ohio really started to go south and job started to become harder to come by. So, you sort of layer all of these emotional and cultural issues on to an economy, it wasn't really working and you had a pretty combustible mixture.

AXELROD: What was your grandfather doing?

VANCE: Well, he was working at a steel mill, Armco steel which is still in operation, with employees and many mixture of people than it used to. But, he was a welder and spent his entire career there. He retired there yet stuck in Armco when he retired and was really proud of it. But, he was one of the few -- he was -- by the time that he retired, it was already clear that the kids who were coming out of high school weren't going to be able to rely on that sort of wage comfortability (ph).

AXELROD: And just out of curiosity because I know you're student of these things. Where those jobs go?

[00:05:01] Did they go overseas or did they just did automation, take a lot of those jobs?

VANCE: Well, it's a combination and it's interesting, the sequencing here really matters, right? So it seems that from the '80s to about the late '90s, there are actually were a fair number of job losses because of trade. You know, the estimate is 2 to 2.5 million jobs. We're lost to China because of trade primarily in the light manufacturing sector.

But, now, a lot of those jobs are going overseas because of technology and automation. So, it's actually -- it strikes me as a different -- we have a different job loss problem now than we did back in the '90s. But even then, technology was a big part of it. Automation was a big part of

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it. It's just the trade was also a part of the story.

AXELROD: Yes. You and have had this --

VANCE: Yes.

AXELROD: -- discussion because you -- I mean, obviously, Donald Trump got elected on large -- in large part, I think. And one of the great motivators was his argument that trade laws had caused all these jobs. And America had been taken advantage of. And he was going to -- and he was going -- and he's acting on that now. We can see him dissolving trade treaties, trying to renegotiate trade treaties. The question is, is he fighting yesterday's war here?

VANCE: Well, I think he is. And I think he's sort of true about this or he's right about this problem halfway and wrong about it halfway. There definitely was a pretty significant disruption caused by trade. I think you can make a pretty good argument that it was not necessarily bad trade deals as much as just the natural flow of the economy.

You know, it's not that we have this terrible trade deal with China. It's just that a lot of things that people used to buy from the U.S. They could buy from China because it was cheaper. So, that cut some on exports, cut some on the jobs that are driven by those exports. But, as we've discussed the bigger issue, especially now, again, was certainly a big issue back in the '90s and the '80s, but it's the issue now is that all of the job losses as you look out in the future are coming from technology and automation. Basically, robots are going to replace people.

And that raises a really difficult question, right, because you can't turn the clock back on technology and automation. Maybe you could a little bit on trade if we were in the '80s. But, we've already lost that battle in some ways. The jobs are already gone. And we've got to be thinking about how to figure out, maybe prevent or at least prepare for the next generation of labor market shift.

AXELROD: Yes. My feeling was that this is probably the greatest economic challenge that we face in terms of social cohesion.

VANCE: Absolutely.

AXELROD: And, the fact that it got virtually no discussion during the presidential campaign was really, really a deficit that, you know, we're going to suffer for it.

VANCE: Absolutely.

AXELROD: We need some sort of strategy. You are a conservative and --

VANCE: Sure.

AXELROD: -- I may have a different view, although I think there's one thing that comes through in your book. And when you talked about your grandfather is that work is not just about a paycheck.

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VANCE: Right.

AXELROD: Or it shouldn't be. I mean, it's about dignity. It's about self-worth.

VANCE: Sure.

AXELROD: And so, yes, well, government could give everyone a check.

VANCE: Right.

AXELROD: But that's not necessarily going to satisfy their soul.

VANCE: Absolutely.

AXELROD: It may pay the bills, but it could have a corrosive impact if there's no -- if they don't have productive work as well.

VANCE: Right. Yes, that's my big worry. And I can't remember if we've discussed this before, but the biggest job, the biggest single category of job that people do right now is drivers, right? Truck drivers, Uber drivers, and so forth, about 3 million people depend on driving for their --

AXELROD: Yes.

VANCE: -- self-worth or their dignity at work, but also obviously, their income. And those jobs are going to go away in pretty rapid order over the next couple of decades.

AXELROD: Lots of driverless cars.

VANCE: Exactly.

AXELROD: Yes.

VANCE: And so, you have to sort of ask this question of when these 3 million jobs go away, what do those 3 million people do? And that, to me, is fundamentally a question about workforce training and how we really prepare people for the next generation of work because it's never been the case in the history of the American economy that these labor market disruptions just put a ton of people out of work. And definitely, it's always the people sort of skill up to the next thing. The disruption can be hard.

It's not necessarily easy to go from a farmhand to, you know, working in an industrial factory in the 1910s, in the 1920s. But that's generally been the stories that this disruption has been a little bit tough, but it's ultimately produced more wealth and more jobs.

AXELROD: But there have to be jobs. There have to be things for people to do.

VANCE: There have to be jobs and there are also have to be people who are properly trained to do those jobs, right? I mean, I think that we used to think in a lot of ways in the '40s and '50s

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that people would graduate from high school, they would have the skills necessary --

AXELROD: Right.

VANCE: -- to go and work in a car manufacturer.

AXELROD: No longer true.

VANCE: But, you graduate from high school, you don't have the skills to go and work at one of these jobs. They're going to come online in the wake of 3 million truck driver jobs going away. I mean, the way that I think about it is that you're going to need people to program, do the dispatching.

[00:10:03] There are a lot of things that will replace the jobs that go away when driverless cars come on.

AXELROD: Right. But they're going to require more skills.

VANCE: And they require more skills.

AXELROD: And different skills, you know.

VANCE: Exactly. And that requires, I think, a fundamental rethinking of the way that we approach training.

AXELROD: Yes. I mean, it's -- but it's easier as a political and I can tell you as an old political strategist.

VANCE: Sure.

AXELROD: It's easier to organize resentment against the Chinese or Mexico --

VANCE: Sure.

AXELROD: -- than it is to organize people around the threat that robots face. Robots are less appealing villain, you know, when you're organizing -- which I think explains why we have the campaign that we had.

Let me return to your story, though --

VANCE: Sure.

AXELROD: -- because one of the most compelling characters in this book and one of the most poignant relationships is that relationship between you and your mom, and your mom who you say people of sort of learn. I don't want to use the word pathologist because it's demeaning or it's taken as demeaning, but they learned --

VANCE: Sure.

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AXELROD: -- they learned from what they know.

VANCE: Right.

AXELROD: And so, your mom repeated some of the patterns that she saw and things kind of span out of control.

VANCE: Yes. That's exactly right. You know, she had my sister when she was 18. She had me when she was 23. She was, you know, really smart person but actually had to graduate from high school earlier.

AXELROD: Salutatorian of her high school class.

VANCE: Yes. I mean, had -- yes, had to graduate from high school early actually because my sister was coming. And, it's really striking in some ways that so many of the things that mom most resented about her childhood just ended up replaying in the childhood that me and Lindsay had.

And it speaks to something that I think is one of the real motivators for me to write the book, which is that, it's not easy to flip off all of the switches that were turned on when you were a kid, right? These things that we see, it's very intuitive. The things that we see, the attitudes that we see --

AXELROD: Absolutely.

VANCE: -- the habits that we develop, they necessarily leave an impact. And that doesn't mean that they're a sort of death sentence that you can't ever escape them. But you have to, I think, appreciate the fact that when kids grow up a certain way, it necessarily leaves its trace on how they approach their own adult life, how they approach their own families and their own children.

AXELROD: You know, I wrote a book, a memoir of myself, and the thing that I discovered in writing it was that it wasn't exercising discovery that I learned a lot about myself. I learned a lot about my family. I learned a lot about the things that influenced my life that I just haven't thought about as deeply before that. And clearly, this is the case with you.

You had some real anger toward your mom and she was negligent and in some ways, when, you know, she was going through difficult times. What did you come to learn about her? And how -- we know now, she had a drug problem. She was a nurse. She had a drug problem and that she fought off and on.

VANCE: Sure.

AXELROD: And what -- how generalized is that experience because we know there's this opioid crisis that's kind of cutting through rural America, small town America right now?

VANCE: Well, on the drug addiction point in a lot of ways, Mom was sort of on the vanguard of

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this crisis that has become incredibly epic, right? So, it is now the leading cause of accidental death in the United States, surpassing gun violence, is overdoses from drugs. And it's especially acute in Ohio, which actually leads the nation in the number of drug overdose deaths last year.

So, it's a very significant problem. The -- and the story the way that mom encountered it in some ways, I remember, and this is the sort of, like you said, the processes of self-discovery that the thing that really caused her to start taking drugs the first time was the death of my grandfather, her dad, my Papal.

And, you start to feel a little bit of pain and maybe you take some drugs because it makes things better. And then all of a sudden, you're in this addictive cycle where the best way to get high, the cheapest way to get high is very often in illegal substance. It's very, very dangerous. And so that's really where mom has found herself.

And for so much of my life, I was very resentful towards her. I built her up a sort of a villain in my mind, but the more that I realized that she wasn't just existing in a vacuum, she wasn't this person who was born out of nowhere and did all these things to me and Lindsay that were bad.

[00:15:03] She was in fact a person who had carried around the scars and the demons from her own past, in her own childhood. And, you know, the most difficult part of writing a book was starting to see the ways in which the way I had grown up. And I had the sort of hubristic attitude of, I've gone to Yale Law School. I've made it. I have achieved the American dream.

And I didn't quite realize that the way that I grew up had actually really impacted me too, and recognizing that, recognizing that some of the traits that I saw in mom that I hated also existed in me, made me realized that maybe I was being a little bit too hard on her. So, I think writing the book really gave me some perspective and some compassion for her.

AXELROD: But in a sense, when you're a child and you -- there are a lot of men and -- that they came in and out of your life.

VANCE: Yes.

AXELROD: You didn't really have a relationship with your dad. And you had a lot of sort of substitutes that cycled in and out of your life. You got to develop a kind of hard bark in order to survive that.

VANCE: Yes.

AXELROD: Not trying to make you excuses for remembering (ph).

But, here's my question, what did that mean for you and, you know, obviously your grandparents filled a role that you desperately needed. But, what did the absence of a consistent sort of a father figure in the home do to you?

VANCE: Well, one, it was just unstable, right, because there were constantly people coming in and out of our lives. Sometimes we were moving with those people. Sometimes they were

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moving with us. I just remembered feeling like my childhood was very chaotic that, you know, our address was always changing. Sometimes it would be hard for me to remember my address because there were so many recent ones.

And that's the biggest takeaway. That's the thing I remember most is this feeling of true chaos and not being especially grounded. You know, the obvious takeaway, something that's definitely true is that having a male role model when you grow up in a working-class environment like this is really important, right? I mean, if you want to be a successful person, if you want to be -- you know, if you want to know how you should be treating your family, how you should be treating your children, it really helps to have a guy around to look up to. And, except for Papal, I really didn't have that. And I think without Papal, I wouldn't have been in much worse circumstance.

So, that absence of a father figure sort of sets you up for failure when you later on become a husband and a father. And of course, you see this in the day that kids grow, you know, especially young boys who grow up in a single mother households aren't quite as good at modern family life as those who grow up in a two-parent family.

AXELROD: You had a chance at the end of President Obama's term to sit down with him and a group of conservatives in a discussion. Did you get a chance to talk to him about this because, obviously, he went through that as well? I mean, he never -- his father disappeared when he was two. And he's spoken a lot about this, about --

VANCE: Sure.

AXELROD: -- what the absence of that presence in the home means to kids.

VANCE: Yes. We didn't get quite that personal, maybe just because there were a few other folks there. But, you know, he definitely -- you know, one thing he said that I really appreciated is he sort of made an off-the-cuff comparison between Michelle and between my wife, Usha. And just the sort of emotional gap that that person feels is really important and really powerful. And this is someone who admires the first lady. And I know Usha admires her, too. That was really cool.

But, no, we didn't talk so much about that sort of emotional void that not having a father around leaves. But, I think we both know it very personally. And I suspect that it would be an easy conversation.

AXELROD: Because one of the things that interest me about your book was you drew the parallel between the sort of kind of disorderly, maybe dystopic nature of life in some of the rural and small town communities --

VANCE: Sure.

AXELROD: -- where you lived and what's going on in inner cities. In fact --

VANCE: Sure.

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AXELROD: -- you're here at the Institute of Politics today and you're going to have a conversation with Alex Kotlowitz who wrote a book called, "There Are No Children Here" --

VANCE: Right.

AXELROD: -- about the housing projects in Chicago. And, there are some striking similarities between the stories.

VANCE: Sure. Yes, there really are. And, one of the things that occurs to me is that it forces you to grow up pretty quickly, right? You mentioned "There Are No Children Here". But, there is a sense in which, when you don't have that person around, you start trying to act like an adult maybe sooner than you should. And you start trying to fill that role in your own household, maybe sooner than you should. And because you don't know really -- because you don't have the example of what that means, you do it in a clunky way and maybe you act overly tough.

[00:20:03] And you're a little bit super defensive about your honor, your family's honor. And one of the comparisons that I think is really apt is that the only community where I really -- where I feel like maybe has the same sense of honor and devotion to family, the sense that if somebody insults your mom or your grandma, you really have to be willing to get in a fight with them. That compares to the Appalachian community is the black community. That's the only place where I've really seen that same sense of family devotion and loyalty really present itself.

AXELROD: Yes. The church is also a big institution in the African American community --

VANCE: Sure.

AXELROD: -- in place in these rural communities as well in small town communities. We're going to take a short break. And we'll be right back with J.D. Vance.

Talk about how you survived this and your decision to enter the military and what role that played in your evolution.

VANCE: Sure, well, I survived it because over the course of early childhood, preadolescence, Mamaw and Papal started to play an increasingly larger role in my life. And by the time I was 12 or 13, I was spending as much time in Mamaw's house as anyone else's.

And by the time I was 14, 15, I was living with her full time. So, there was a sense in which Mamaw provided me the stability and the safe home that I really needed that kids, I think, really do need to thrive and survive. And that was a big part of it. So I started to do a little bit better in school, then I joined the Marine Corps right out of high school. This was April 2003, I believe, when I signed the enlistment papers right after we had invaded Iraq.

And so, I spent four years in the Marine Corps. Of course, I deployed like most of my peers at the time did. But I also learned some really important social skills in the Marine Corps, things that folks don't appreciate like how to balance a checkbook or how to shop around for a car loan. These things that people don't appreciate in military serves a role in educating people about those things.

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So, did that and left the Marine Corps, went to Ohio State, spend a couple of years there and got my bachelor's degree. And then went from there to Yale Law School. And it's sort of crazy just how frenetic my life has been since I left the Marine Corps. I felt like there's been this incredible upper trajectory which, of course, the book is just a part of it.

But, I sort of look around and think to myself, "You know, holy shit, how did I get here? Holy crap, how did I get here?"

AXELROD: No, it's a podcast. Say whatever you want, man, because I'm going to read some of your grandmother's quote. So --

VANCE: OK.

AXELROD: -- we practically do that on the radio.

VANCE: Sure.

AXELROD: Or on TV. When you went to the Marine Corps, you were confronted with not just a different set of rules and discipline, and so on, but a very diverse group of people. How did you react to that? I mean, you know, there are people from the inner city, from rural communities, from all over this country, different faiths, different experiences. How did you meld?

VANCE: Yes. Well, that was one of my favorite parts of the Marine Corps is that I felt really connected to people from different backgrounds in a way that I hadn't growing up, partially just because I didn't spend that much time around people from really different backgrounds. You know, the Marine Corps folks always said, there aren't -- there is no black and white. There's dark green and light green and you're all equally worthless. And I thought that was an interesting way of framing it.

But, you know, it's fascinating, especially when viewed in the context of a lot of the conversations that we have about colorblindness in America and whether that's a desirable thing to talk about in light of continued racial disparities. But I do think there's some real value as a sort of cultural ethic and a cultural value to sort of tell everybody, it doesn't matter what color you are. You guys are all on the same team.

And of course, what's so cool about the Marine Corps but, you know, is also so miserable about the Marine Corps, especially in Boot Camp is that you have sort of these drill instructors who were set up as psychological obstacles to overcome. And they're equally mean to everyone. And that does have a way of binding everyone together, right? That you have shared --

AXELROD: (Inaudible) loves company.

VANCE: Yes, and a common enemy.

AXELROD: You know, one of things that I often think about is how the distance we now have from World War II, when everybody was in some way enlisted, everybody --

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VANCE: Yes.

AXELROD: -- was involved, including women who worked in factories, or the Rosie, the Riveters. And there was this sense of common purpose, which was to defeat fascism --

VANCE: Right.

AXELROD: -- and save the world from it.

And so, you had -- and we've had people here talked about this. You had people even in public life who fought bitterly over issues, but also had fought side by side --

VANCE: Right.

AXELROD: -- in the war. And the further we get away from that experience, it seems to me the more fractionated we get. There isn't the sense that we're all on the same team.

[00:25:04] VANCE: Yes, that's definitely true. And that really worries me and the military, in some ways, is just at this point, a symptom or representation of the fact that we're increasingly fractured, right?

And so, the military's often set up or people to talk about it as if it's just a bunch of poor kids. And that's, of course, not true. It's a pretty solid mixture. There actually are much fewer people on the extremes, right? There are very few super wealthy and very few super poor people in the military. But otherwise, you sort of have folks who cluster around the middle of the income distribution.

And they also are relatively geographically clustered, right? So, it's not something like -- sorry, that they're geographically clustered, too, right? So, kids in the northeast are much, much less likely to enlist than kids in the south, kids in the Rust Belt, kids in the west.

And so it, in some ways, adds to the sense of alienation because you have these people who were fighting in a time of war, their families, their communities are very involved psychologically in what's going on in Iraq and Afghanistan. And you do have increasingly a population of people who don't really know anyone who served.

AXELROD: Right.

VANCE: -- or who aren't connected to in a very personal way. And that worries me, right? It's - - I don't think our military was ever set up to be a sort of warrior class, where the communities that supported these folks were very connected and the communities that weren't that close to it are just so culturally foreign to a lot of folks in the military. That they don't really appreciate -- you know, that they honor the troops, they appreciate the troops, and they're very kind in a lot of ways. But you can't really appreciate what's going on unless you know somebody, I think, is (inaudible).

AXELROD: Yes, it's striking to me, having grown up as a kid during the Vietnam Era. And, the way returning service people were treated then which was miserably --

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VANCE: Right.

AXELROD: -- as kind of a symbol of a war that many thought was unjust. But what was unjust was that these -- they serve their country and they were mistreated when they came home.

VANCE: Right.

AXELROD: Now, you know, you go to a public event, you go to a supporting event, you know, a service person, a wounded warrior's introduced and then there's this ovation, you know.

VANCE: Absolutely.

AXELROD: But, you're right. It's sort of attenuated. People don't really identify with the experience. What about national service or some kind of program that requires people to work side by side? You're kind of a -- you have libertarian, I think, tends -- no. Am I ascribing you stuff that I --

VANCE: Well, no, I'd say that my conservatism is much more communitarian, right? So I think government has a role to play in these issues. And I really worry about these layers of civic society. And I think the military is one of them. And so I -- this problem really worries me, right? This idea that we're sort of clustering cloistering in our separate bubbles, and there is like a warrior class, and their families, and then there is another class that, like you said, supports but doesn't really know the troops.

AXELROD: Yes. So should there be sort of required national service, because that's one way to get everybody in.

VANCE: Yes. Yes, I've thought a fair amount about this and still don't have a strong opinion on it. But, I'm inclined to say that we should be thinking of a way to get people involved in some sort of shared national effort. Maybe you don't make it mandatory, maybe you just create the incentive structure so that a lot of people want to do it.

But it really does worry me that if you're an American teenager right now, what is being an American really mean to you? And I worry that if you grow up in Chicago, or you grow up in Columbus, what being an American means is so different than what being an American means, if you grow up California, or you grow up in New York City. And I think that part of that is because we're so disconnected from a real shared national effort.

So, I'm really open to the idea but, you know, I just -- I'm mindful -- you know, I'm not a very smart political guy, but I'm mindful of the fact that national service is sort of never gone anywhere politically.

AXELROD: Yes. Well, no, I mean, people don't want to be compelled to do things.

VANCE: Right.

AXELROD: But the fact is, we -- that I think one of the most treacherous things that we're

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facing right now is a fundamental sense that we're on different teams. And that we absolutely have different views of what this country is. And, it's not -- the unifying themes have been receding. So, it was very clear --

VANCE: Yes.

AXELROD: -- World War II, what everybody was fighting for, whether they were from the south or the city --

VANCE: Yes.

AXELROD: -- or everybody was fighting to defeat this menacing discouragement of Hitler and, you know, the Axis and so on.

VANCE: Right.

AXELROD: And so, reflecting that, you ought to know what you're fighting for, which was freedom and all the things that we should value.

[00:30:04] VANCE: Sure.

AXELROD: It's very hazy now. And, if we lose that, then it seems to me we'd lose the essence of what's made this country. And you wrote compelling, and one of the most moving anecdotes in a very moving book to me was this small anecdote you told about a child you encountered in Iraq.

VANCE: Yes.

AXELROD: And you gave this child an eraser, a pretty unremarkable gift.

VANCE: Yes.

AXELROD: And this child skipped off triumphantly holding this.

VANCE: Yes.

AXELROD: And, I mean, I had tears in my eyes when I read that thinking about that kid. Particularly in light of recent events --

VANCE: Absolutely.

AXELROD: -- and this travel ban and so on. So, what did that do for you? You wrote about this.

VANCE: Sure.

AXELROD: In terms of your orientation about our country.

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VANCE: Yes. Well, one of the things that it did is just personally, I was a pretty resentful kid. I held a lot of grudges. I think a lot -- against a lot of the people who I felt had wronged me, my mom, others, so forth. But it really made me realize at a fundamental sense that despite the fact that I may be disadvantaged relative to some people who grew up in the United States, I was remarkably advantaged to everyone who had ever lived, and irrelative to most people who had ever lived in the history of the world. And of course, that created a certain appreciation for the place that I came from and the country that I came from, right? That disadvantage in the United States is growing up relatively poor in the Rust Belt and being a little bit worried about, you know, where you're going to sleep that night, or whether your mom is going to come home with a new boyfriend.

Whereas disadvantage and big chunks of the rest of the world is, you're so excited that somebody gave you an eraser. That you hold it up like a trophy to your parents, right? I mean, there's something really striking about how different and blessed my life is relative to that kid's. And I think the same exact thing, right? Especially this is in Northwestern Iraq, where this happened, and I wonder what happened to that family?

AXELROD: Yes.

VANCE: And the answer is, probably not good and it could even be much, much worse.

AXELROD: Yes. It also raises the question of what -- you know, there is this debate right now about whether we can sort of put a mode around the country. And the president said we're not going to let the ravages of other countries wash up on our shores.

But, the question is, can we live in a world -- there's the moral question of whether we want to live in a world where many, many people are living the kind of life that that little boy was living.

VANCE: Right.

AXELROD: But, the second question is, what is the consequence of that in terms of terrorism and other problems that are unavoidable in a world this small.

VANCE: Right. Yes, well, I'm very mindful of the fact that there obviously is a tradeoff between humanitarian interest and national interest sometimes. And I do worry that folks on both the left and the right have been a little bit too high-minded about American foreign policy. And so, there's been this backlash, right? There's this sense that we have to retrench a little bit because the elites of both parties have sort of gone off on various military misadventures, in the name of very -- various humanitarian goals.

AXELROD: And the hubris (ph) that said we can impose democracy --

VANCE: Exactly.

AXELROD: -- in places that didn't have the civic --

VANCE: Absolutely.

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AXELROD: -- sort of institutions to support it, and where tribalism is a much more potent force.

VANCE: Right. And so, I sort of get the reaction against that in a certain way, right? I understand this impulse, and for a very long time, I was, you know, what are my culture. I'm curious for this very reason that he was willing to criticize some of these sacred cows --

AXELROD: Yes.

VANCE: -- in the foreign policy consensus.

My worry is that we're going in too far in the other direction, right? I mean, I have a very old-fashioned view, especially with regards to Iraq, which can be simply stated as you break it, you buy it. And I don't think that we can have this sort of never-ending commitment to the country of Iraq. But I think about, you know, these military interpreters. I actually talked to a general a few days ago, his interpreter was trapped in an airport after this refugee order came down.

And I just think about what we really owe to these people, especially the people who helped us out. And I worry that we've gone again too far in the other direction. And so, like with everything, I always hope that we can find some sort of happy median, where maybe we can balance these interests a little bit better than we have in the past. But we're not, you know, putting a hard ban on people in a way that affects people who've been very good to us. But, it's in some ways, I think, a natural outgrowth of a pretty dark period in the American foreign policy.

AXELROD: Yes. Well, there's no question about that. The other concern about -- because I thoroughly -- look, I think the thing that I learned when I was in government was that the question that's not asked frequently enough about foreign or domestic policies, and then what.

[00:35:12] VANCE: Right.

AXELROD: If you do this, and then what?

VANCE: Sure.

AXELROD: One of the things that I admired about my old boss was that he very much was always asking that question. Sometimes he was criticized for it. Syria is an example where, you know, his concern was that we would be embroiled in another situation like Iraq, where American troops would be committed for a time immemorial.

VANCE: Sure.

AXELROD: And that the country couldn't afford that. But there is a virtue to sort of asking that question because it's easy. It's always easy to do the first thing.

VANCE: Right.

AXELROD: It's hard to deal with the aftermath of it.

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VANCE: Of course. And the backlash comes in some way or another, right? I mean, one of the most underreported parts of the 2016 political cycle, in my mind, going back to this point about this cultural segregation between those who serve in their communities and those who don't, is that Donald Trump did extremely well in places with high veteran populations, right?

And what's so striking about that, to me, is that you have this group of people who are very connected to these foreign policy decisions in very personal ways, but are increasingly resentful at them.

And I felt like people didn't really appreciate that enough. They didn't appreciate how powerful of a part of Trump's appeal that was.

AXELROD: Let's talk about that, about your family, your neighbors, and the -- there is this incredible thing. You travel around the country. And if you're in a city, people say, "Well, I don't know anybody who voted for Donald Trump." You know, but I have a house in rural Michigan and every single neighbor, it seemed, had a Trump sign on their lawn. As I tell folks in the city --

VANCE: Yes.

AXELROD: -- these are not bad people. These are good people.

VANCE: Yes, yes.

AXELROD: Good neighbors. They care about each other and they care about their families, and they care about the community.

VANCE: Sure.

AXELROD: But -- so, now you can go full Margaret Mead here and explain what -- explain his appeal and sort of the dynamic that he spoke to. The notion that the economy is rigged, the notion that the game is stacked against, you know, working-class whites --

VANCE: Sure.

AXELROD: -- in this country and so on. I mean, it was a powerful, powerful thing and he nailed it.

VANCE: Yes, well, one of the ways I always framed this is that we can get too caught up in talking about the Trump phenomenon in obsessing over this question of economic anxiety, and sort of how we measure or try to understand economic anxiety.

The sense that I get is that, sure, there's an element of an economic anxiety but all of the problems that I write about in the book, right? This sort of broad regional decline, the addiction epidemic, the family breakdown, rising incarceration rates, there are just so many different social indicators. Where if you live in these communities, you look around and say, "My god, nothing is going in the right direction."

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It's not just the people can't find jobs. It's that the whole community is sort of collapsing, and whether you're lucky enough to avoid that collapse, or you're just broadly aware that some of the people around you are really suffering. It creates this real frustration and resentment at the political class, at the financial class. And I think Trump was the first Republican candidate to even try to tap into that.

And so, there's that element of the Trump is in thing (ph), the sense that the world is declining and is falling apart around us. And we're really frustrated at the people who are pulling the levers because they haven't done anything to stop it.

The other thing that is less appreciated about this Trump phenomenon is that, it is in some ways a reaction to the sense of condescension that people feel, right? So, cultural elites, and I hate that term, but I'm going to use it, they control various levers of media, of finance, of politics. And so, the conversation is really dominated by the things that folks who went to universities like Chicago --

AXELROD: Yes.

VANCE: -- think about and care about. And consequently, sometimes there is a real sense of condescension that can come from some of these sectors of our society. And people don't like it. They're very aware of it. And, it's something that really drove this reaction, and Trump was the first guy. He was sort of raising the proverbial middle finger to a lot of the people that they wish they could raise their middle finger to but they didn't have the platform to do it.

AXELROD: It's interesting because as we sit here, you know, he had a meeting this morning with his financial team.

VANCE: Yes.

AXELROD: And sitting next to him was Steve Schwarzman from BlackRock.

[00:40:01] VANCE: Sure.

AXELROD: And, a lot of his team comes from Goldman Sachs.

VANCE: Right.

AXELROD: Institutions that he was very hard on in there. And he's begun that sort of dissolution of the financial reforms that were put in place after the last --

VANCE: Sure.

AXELROD: -- crisis, including today was a regulation that required people who advised folks on their retirement to have a fiduciary responsibility to their client. To give them facts rather than representing people who were selling products, seems like that kind of stuff would be important, you know, to working-class --

VANCE: Sure.

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AXELROD: -- people. But, my guess is that this is not going to impeach him with those voters.

VANCE: Well, I do think that there are -- there could be accumulative effect where he could start to lose some of the core working-class support that he developed over the campaign, especially if not so much the particular policies people don't like. But if this sense of things getting worse doesn't reverse, right? If there is an actual material improvement, it's been people and circumstances. I think --

AXELROD: Which is going to be hard to produce.

VANCE: Which is going to be hard to produce, and I think that may produce a political backlash. Maybe it takes four years, maybe it takes eight years, but I suspect it may well happen.

The other way I look at this is, as I've said, people don't hate the player, they hate the game. And if they didn't like rich people making policy or rich people serving in positions of power, they wouldn't have voted for Donald Trump in the first place. But there's this real insightful thing that Trump did, where he said, "Yes, I'm rich, yes, I've taken advantaged of the system. I know how it works. And now, I'm going to rig the system instead of against you, for you."

And that was a really powerful because he was feasting up. It's like somebody from the inside is an ambassador to us. He's telling us all the things that we've already believed. But now, he's promising that this is going to get worked on our behalf. So, you know, I don't think that people are worried that, you know, Steve Mnuchin has X number of -- X millions of dollars stowed away in the Cayman Islands. If that's true, I've just seen reports about that.

AXELROD: Yes.

VANCE: What they care is --

AXELROD: My guess is we'll never know.

VANCE: Right. But what they care about is that those rules are in place that allow rich people to do that in the first place. They don't care if people were going to take advantage of them once they're there. They just want them to not exist.

AXELROD: And I think the notion, if I recall, said, "Yes, we're going to -- that's -- we got to fix of all that."

VANCE: Exactly. I mean, he --

AXELROD: Yes.

VANCE: -- during his confirmation hearing, I thought that was so fascinating. What he did is he framed it as a matter of, yes, you know, some of my clients have taken advantage of these

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things, but they shouldn't be able to. So we're going to change the rules. And that really is music to a lot of people's ears.

AXELROD: Yes, if they change the rules.

VANCE: What if they change the rules and if things start to get better? And that's going to be the real question.

So, I think that, you know, we obviously are really obsessed with the day-to-day politics of this thing. And I suspect that it's not, you know, the day to day, the week to week even the month to month isn't going to matter so much to Trump's core working-class voters. It's going to be the year to year. And so, he's got a pretty long leash, but he doesn't have a leash forever.

AXELROD: Let us honor American capitalism by taking another break. And we'll be right back.

One of the things that clearly comes through in your book and really is concerning, and it's happening not just here but everywhere in the world is this sort of diminution of trust in institutions.

VANCE: Sure.

AXELROD: And you write about sort of the stuff that you heard from family and friends from your old community. And --

VANCE: Sure.

AXELROD: -- from, let's say, you write -- with little trust in the press, there's no check on the internet, conspiracy, theories that rule a digital world. Barack Obama is a foreign alien, actively trying to destroy our country. Everything the media tells us is a lie. Many of the white working class believed the worst about their society.

Here's a small sample, you said from Alex Jones, the right-wing radio talker, on the anniversary of 9/11, a documentary about the unanswered questions of the terrorist attacks suggesting that the U.S. government played a role in the massacre of its own people, on Obamacare legislation requiring microchip implantations in new health care patients.

VANCE: Yes.

AXELROD: From the popular website WorldNetDaily, a notion that the government was behind the Newtown massacre to spurn anti-gun movement into -- from multiple Internet sources' suggestions that Obama will soon implement martial law in order to secure power for a third presidential term. We can now safely reassure people that that did not happen. But --

VANCE: None out of the woods yet. There's always 2020 or 2024.

AXELROD: Yes, exactly. But, we can't trust the evening news. We can't trust our politicians. Our universe is a gateway to a better life or rigged against us.

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[00:45:01] We can't get jobs. You can't believe these things and participate meaningfully in society. And you're right.

So, how does this play out overtime? And if Trump disappoints these folks, do they look for alternatives, you know, in the mainstream or do they become more radicalized?

VANCE: Well, they may very well become more radicalized, and I think this issue frames a really important topic for the mainstream media, which I do think is an important civic institution in our democracy. And obviously, its credibility is pretty low.

You know, I've been critical of some of the conspiracy theories that are out there. Obviously, I don't believe them. But I also think that for the mainstream media to be a good arbiter of truth, it has to be really careful and has to guard its credibility. And this has been especially tough in the age of Trump with Twitter, right, where I feel like every day, some new piece of information comes out. It gets tweeted 10,000 times and then two hours later, somebody comes back and says, "Oh no, that wasn't actually true", right? The MLK bust issue. There was an issue about treasury regulations being favorable to the Russians even yesterday.

AXELROD: Yes.

VANCE: There --

AXELROD: And I was -- and I ended up correcting my -- you know, I raised the question as to whether this wasn't the beginning of some sort of relaxation of sanctions and, you know, there were some clarifications. Part of it is on the administration because --

VANCE: Right.

AXELROD: -- it weren't very adroit at explaining it in the first place.

VANCE: Yes, yes. And I think that that's admirable to sort of, you know, walk that stuff back. I didn't know that you had tweeted about that, but I saw a couple of others had. But it worries me that we have this new cycle that is almost designed to undermine mainstream media's credibility.

And I just think it's really important and I, you know, include Fox News in that whether it's sort of right of center or left of center. There's -- these are really important institutions and I'd like to see people actually believe them. But for people who believe them, they have to be a little bit more guarded, I think, about the information that gets out there, and that's especially tough in this era.

There's one other really interesting point about this which goes to this cultural and geographic segregation that we have. And, you know, a couple of weeks ago, Obama did something at the very end of his term, some sort of grant to the Palestinians in one form or another. I don't remember the exact policy.

But, there were a lot of conspiracies that circulated in response to it. Oh, look, see, that shows

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that Obama was just secretly a foreign agent who is trying to undermine the U.S. national security. And somebody asked me about this and said, "You know, I saw this policy. It seems pretty problematic and, you know, do you think that what they're saying about the president is true that he's really in service of some foreign agenda?" And I said, "You know what, I don't have any view on the policy because I don't even know what you're talking about. I haven't read it or read about it. But I actually think he's a pretty good guy. I know people who worked for him and I think whether you agree with his politics, he seems like a pretty decent guy."

AXELROD: You actually wrote essay on that.

VANCE: Yes. But what was so interesting is that the person said, "Oh, that's really good to know because he seems like a good guy. I never vote for him but he seems like a good guy. That's good to know."

And it's like that having someone who's connected to institutions of media who can sort of say, "Oh, yes, yes, they're not all just, you know, making stuff up because they're part of this bubble, this self-protective bubble." But someone you actually know being part of these institutions makes them seem a little bit more available to you and makes them seem a little more believable, right? It's actually -- if you think about it psychologically, if you knew not a single person who was reporting the news on CNN, you didn't know a single producer, you didn't know a single person who was even tangentially close to a mainstream press outlet, you might not trust him either, right, especially when you have some of these credibility issues.

AXELROD: Yes, which is a big change from the generations earlier when you had the Walter Cronkite --

VANCE: Exactly.

AXELROD: -- to the world who everybody watched and who was widely trusted, probably had as much as anything to do with turning the country against the war in Vietnam --

VANCE: Yes.

AXELROD: -- because of his reporting from there.

Let me talk about your political philosophy, because you -- in the book, you talk about your suspicion of government programs. And then there's an interesting paradox because a lot of people in that community that you grew up in who were the beneficiary of government programs.

VANCE: I was.

AXELROD: And, yes, you were and you were educated, I assume, on the G.I. Bill and so on. But, deeply resentful of government. I mean, I'm not talking about you, I'm talking about --

VANCE: Sure.

AXELROD: -- those folks. And, the way you described it is understandable. There's the sense

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of paternalism that people resented. So, explain this.

[00:50:00] VANCE: Yes. I'd say the best encapsulation of my philosophy here is in the book where I say government can help, but it can't solve these problems. And what I mean here is that government can play a positive role. It can help address some of these issues, but it can't fix the whole thing, right? There's this question of personal responsibility, of civic responsibility. I'm especially concerned about some of these mediating institutions that exist between the state and between the individuals, things like churches, and A-groups, community organizations, and so forth.

So my view here is that government has both a responsibility and a role to play, but if we take stock of the problems that I write about and how multigenerational they are, things like social capital, attitudes towards the development of human capital, I just think that we're lying to ourselves if we think that the way that we've approached these issues in the past is especially helpful.

I think that we've done one really good thing with the social welfare state over the past 50 years in the United States, and we've made it really hard to starve to death or to die of relatively treatable illnesses. But we haven't been especially good at taking poor people and actually giving them the long-term tools to elevate themselves and create real class mobility.

And that worries me, right? It worries me for a lot of the issues that we've talked about in the past, but it also just worries me because I think that part of being an American, like the thing that I associate with being an American, is it a poor kid can do whatever he wants to so long as his talents and work will allow it. And that is just not as true as we'd like to think it is here.

AXELROD: Yes. I can't agree with you enough. I've said this before here, I'm a son of an immigrant who came here with nothing. By the way, fled religious persecution and two years before the 1924 Immigration Act, that would rung the curtain down on immigration, he wouldn't have been able to come here because of that immigration.

VANCE: Where from?

AXELROD: He was from Ukraine.

VANCE: OK.

AXELROD: And so -- and, you know, he was able to find a life here. You know, I always talk about how incredible it was to go back to Eastern Europe as a senior advisor to the president of the United States. Literally, one generation after my father fled there and it said a lot to me about this country. But the thing, the value that has made us distinctive or one of them is this notion that if you work hard, you can get ahead.

VANCE: Right.

AXELROD: And what's clear from your book and from experiences, there are a lot of Americans who don't feel that way anymore. And that's particularly true among low-income white working class --

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VANCE: Sure.

AXELROD: -- Americans. Big problem.

VANCE: Yes. It's a huge problem, right? And it's not just a problem for basic reasons of ethics and what we want our country to be and the values that we hold. But it also does affect our political process, right?

AXELROD: Yes, it does. And it all -- and the question is, you know, given the dynamics of our economy and the kind of gap between the educated and trained versus the non-educated and trained in terms of opportunity. You run the risk of this narrowing band of successful people and a growing band of people who feel left behind in this process.

VANCE: Yes.

AXELROD: So, where do you think -- how -- you mentioned the education and training before, what kinds of things should government be doing to try and deal with that?

VANCE: Well, there are a few things that I have in mind that struck me as relatively low-hanging fruit, that some of them are really politically difficult, right? So, if we think about the way that Germany or a lot of Scandinavian countries approach workforce development and educating their population, it's much different than the way that we approach these things, right?

When you graduate from high school in the United States, you're effectively given two choices, go and get a four-year college degree or go and make \$8 an hour at McDonald's, right? There are very, very few people who were given more than those two opportunities. And that's a significant problem that there aren't more bridges to what might be, you know, we might call a dignified middle-class life.

So, I think to the degree that we can push on community and technical education, apprenticeships, and so forth, but we've talked about that and we continue to talk about that as a society. But I think it requires a really fundamental reformulation of how we think about the role of education in our society to do anything comparable to what Germany is doing. That requires a pretty significant shift. And I just don't know if there's the political capital in the country to actually do it.

One thing that really bothers me and there's this really interesting draft paper that's circulating in the economics world right now about how destructive it is -- that it is that we have such little geographic mobility. So in the '40s and '50s, you grew up in a poor area, you were very likely to move to an area where there is more opportunity.

[00:55:05] And that level of geographic mobility has fallen off in our country in the past 50 years. And I think it's fallen off for a couple of reasons.

You know, one of the opportunity costs of staying put are lower, right? If you didn't move in the '40s and '50s, you starve to death. Now, the opportunity costs are obviously lower, you at least

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can subsist. Now, that doesn't mean that we take away those programs and give people a choice between starving to death or moving, but we have to sort of rebalance the scales a little bit to make moving a more attractive option.

And relatedly on the other end, as you may all know, the areas that are highest employment that have the most opportunity, that have some of the best social and civic institutions are the places where it is impossible for poor people to live in because zoning and land-use regulations have driven up the cost of housing.

AXELROD: Right.

VANCE: So it's not surprising to me that we have this problem. And I sort of am cognizant of the tech dystopian idea that we're going to have a brave new world of alphas and betas, and the betas are just going to be this permanent underclass of people who can't work because they don't have the skills to do it. But I'm not willing to go down that route because it seems to me there are a couple of things -- a couple of policy levers that we could pull that strike me as potentially very powerful.

AXELROD: You talk about moving. You've moved --

VANCE: Yes.

AXELROD: -- back to Ohio. You were in Silicon Valley working with Peter Thiel. We could have a long conversation about it. But, let me focus on you.

VANCE: Sure.

AXELROD: What caused you to move back, and are you considering running for office yourself?

VANCE: So what caused me to move back --

AXELROD: You should, man. No, seriously.

VANXE: What caused me to move, always the first question. That one is the easiest one. I've wanted to move back since I was -- since I left Marine Corps in 2003. And I remember in Boot Camp, where I was so homesick, and after a couple of weeks, the drill instructors would say, "If you're still homesick, you should just go home because you don't belong here, you know, you should be ready to completely detach yourself from your home." And I basically have been homesick since that moment and it never stopped, right?

So I've come back to a beautiful college.

AXELROD: But you wrote about coming back to Middletown, you've -- that you've felt sort of alien because of your experiences.

VANCE: Yes, it's not always easy, right? I mean, there are definitely things and experiences that I've had that make it a little bit hard for folks from back home, especially family to really

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understand what my new life is all about. But that all said, that's a relatively minor --

AXELROD: Where in Ohio are you moving?

VANCE: I'm going to move to Columbus. Yes, just because it's centrally located. But, you know, always -- I've always wanted to move back home. And so, this seemed like as good a time as any. I have this platform. There are a couple of issues that I really care about so we might as well go back and talk about them. And I'm going to found a small little nonprofit to work on the opioid crisis, specifically.

You know, this question about running for office, I should probably get better at answering this question that I am right now because a lot of folks have asked a couple --

AXELROD: I'm just kidding (ph) you.

(CROSSTALK)

AXELROD: (Inaudible) has to practice.

VANCE: But no, I mean, you know, in the abstracts, the idea of public service has always appealed to me. And it's something that I'd be interested in doing eventually. But I think when people ask what they mean in the short term, and that just seems hubristic and a little bit weird to think about running for office in the short term.

AXELROD: But let me give you a hint as an old political consultant. Probably it's not the first thing you should say when you return from Silicon Valley. And I'm here to save you, you know, it's probably wouldn't go over that well.

But listen, I really do encourage you to think about it. And one of things that worries me is that really bright successful people are so appalled by the process that they don't want to get involved in it. And, I think if that is another thing that is a menacing cloud hovering over our democracy and our society, so start a trend. You know what I mean?

I just want to finish. I said I would read a one quote from your grandmother.

VANCE: OK.

AXELROD: And I -- and the one that I liked so much is the advice she gave you, "Never be like these fucking losers who think that the deck is stacked against them. You can do anything you want."

And, you obviously internalized that message, because you are in a position to do anything you want. So, I thought we -- she's such a central character in this book and such a vivid and incredible character --

VANCE: Sure.

AXELROD: -- that I thought we ought to finish this conversation by paying tribute to her, by

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acknowledging that you are making what you want of your life.

VANCE: Well, thank you. And I appreciate that and I'm making what I want of my life in large measure because she made a lot of sacrifices for me. And I always felt guilty that she was this old woman who couldn't move around very well and was really arthritic. But she was still putting food in front of me and making sure that I had access to some of these opportunities.

[01:00:06] And I'm glad that she's getting some -- you know, even though she's not around to see it that she's getting some credit for it because she really does deserve it.

What's so interesting about that quote, of course, is that Mamaw recognize that life was unfair for poor people. She was a classic Blue Dog Democrat. She always balance that message with understand that life isn't fair, but never think the deck is stacked against you because as unfair as life can sometimes be, the worst thing of all is to really give up on yourself and to think that you don't have any choice.

And, I'm glad that she taught that message. And I'm glad that it took eventually.

AXELROD: Well, thanks so much for being here. I should point out that we're now colleagues at CNN, that you've signed on there. And I look forward to a lot of conversations in the future.

J.D. Vance, happy to have you here.

VANCE: Yes. Thank you.

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