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The Axe Files - Ep. 144: Gov. John Kasich

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David Axelrod: [00:00:07] I can. We can just tell people you're eating chocolate.

John Kasich: [00:00:10] OK. Go ahead.

David Axelrod: [00:00:12] Governor John Kasich welcome. For our listeners governor Kasich on the run here. So he's eating chocolate ice cream.

John Kasich: [00:00:20] It's very good.

David Axelrod: [00:00:20] I'm going to ask lengthier questions so that he can finish his ice cream. And then he'll give lengthy answers when he's done with his ice cream. That seems like a good deal.

John Kasich: [00:00:31] I'm enjoying these books.

David Axelrod: [00:00:33] On my bookshelf.

John Kasich: [00:00:33] John Lindsay. Tip O'Neill who I knew tipped. John McCain. Yeah it's a great great bookshelf.

David Axelrod: [00:00:40] Yes and I'm going to add John Kasich to the bookshelf when we're done here.

John Kasich: [00:00:43] Good.

David Axelrod: [00:00:43] When we're here when we talk about these so-called Trump the Trump base, the Trump voter, we're really talking about the folks that you grew up with. You grew up in Pennsylvania right outside.

John Kasich: [00:01:02] It's very blue collar, right.

David Axelrod: [00:01:03] Yeah. Tell me about that. Tell me about about where you grew up.

John Kasich: [00:01:07] They were kind of conservative George Meany type Democrats you know common sense God fearing pretty conservative you know flag America you know all that kind of scholar and pro union very strong for the union. And you know they are they're people who I think over time felt as though they're not respected maybe they're not appreciated they are at risk because of their jobs. And I don't want to understand--

David Axelrod: [00:01:43] They may be right about all of that.

John Kasich: [00:01:44] Yeah. And they were look and there's a strong man saying you know there's an element when you grow up there are people just making you know kind of wild statements and strong statements and this is bad. Nobody cares and we throw the whole thing out and I think there was an element of that and then this guy shows up and he's got them all riled up and he says by the way I'll fix every problem you have. Just give me a chance and say Make America Great goes to. Exactly. I've never thought about this before. But make America great goes hand in glove with I love my country but I feel as though I'm getting the short end of the state.

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO INSTITUTE OF POLITICS & CNN PRESENT

THE AXE FILES

David Axelrod: [00:02:18] Well, don't forget the word again because there is this sense that something has been lost. That's--

John Kasich: [00:02:23] Yeah that's right, yeah.

David Axelrod: [00:02:25] That's part of what made up the whole thing work. But--I want to talk about Trump. First I want to talk about Kasich. So tell me about your folks and and how you grew up?

John Kasich: [00:02:34] Well my dad carried mail and he came from a big family and they had their challenges. His father was a coal miner, died of black lung. My mother--her mother was Croatian--my mother was very outspoken smart opinionated undereducated and they were--my mother inspired me. I always like to say that she was a talk show pioneer. She would listen to the radio and then scream at it. And my father had the twinkle in his eye and they did never really--look, they did--It was hard for them to understand what their son was doing. Not that they weren't smart. It was like "Johnny what are you doing." You know. And then I get elected.

David Axelrod: [00:03:18] Yeah but what what what what drew you to that? I mean what--

John Kasich: [00:03:22] I think my mother probably she was you know had all these opinions on things and I think I found it interesting and. And she would give me quiet support on things I would do and you know David I can't--I remember I went to a school board meeting we had sort of a--a it's called a race riot but a real disturbance and I went to the meeting and I can remember getting up--

David Axelrod: [00:03:46] This is when you were a student?

John Kasich: [00:03:47] Yeah I remember getting up and I was yelling at the school board and saying you know now we have this big meeting and you're all paying attention where are you. Most of the time and I remember leaving I didn't think anything of it and the next day my father came home and he said Johnny would you do down there. And so it was a steady stream and then you know I got involved in the church and the next thing you know I was they asked me if I could run one of the services like be a commentator as the leader of the of the people. And I started speaking when I was probably I don't know 15 years old or something like that so just one thing led to another.

David Axelrod: [00:04:19] One of your friends some said somewhere in an interview that you were so involved in the church that you thought about that is your career at one point.

John Kasich: [00:04:31] Yeah. And I figured out that I couldn't be a priest and like girls. So that went by the wayside.

David Axelrod: [00:04:37] But the standing in front of people and speaking some of that came naturally to.

John Kasich: [00:04:41] Well, I something I did and I David honestly I--what unbelievable thing you know being such a young man and stand in front of people and speaking in one time by the way that I announced to closing him and one thing I would not do was sing which is what I should have been doing when I think about Justin Timberlake but I wouldn't sing. And so I announced closing him and nobody was singing and so I yelled into the microphone as the priest was coming off the altar to stop the organ and I gave him a lecture. I said you know God loves when you sing so pick up the pages take up the book and turn to page 50 and sing the closing him. Not much more singing and the thing ends that I'm walking out. The lady walks up to me she says you know young man I love to sing. Could you give us the right page the next time? So you know, David. Never unsure. Just keep moving but it's--

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THE AXE FILES

David Axelrod: [00:05:33] Always sure and sometimes right, huh?

John Kasich: [00:05:35] You know when I think back to that. It's just unbelievable that I've had those kinds of breaks. And one thing is kind of led to another.

David Axelrod: [00:05:45] I'll tell you we just sat with a group of students here at the University of Chicago at the Institute of Politics and you told the story about your your meeting with President Nixon and how that all came about when you were 18 years old. Share that story.

John Kasich: [00:06:01] I went to Ohio State. I went in to see the president of the University and the first couple of weeks because I was upset about some things and--

David Axelrod: [00:06:07] You just went in to see the president because you were upset about somethings an 18 year old? The president of Ohio State?

John Kasich: [00:06:12] Well, I was there a couple weeks you know I--

David Axelrod: [00:06:14] You had a chance to size things up with your list of concerns.

John Kasich: [00:06:18] That's exactly what happened. And so he took out I think kind of like me, he was intrigued and I told him how nice his office was and I mean--

David Axelrod: [00:06:26] You realize how audacious that alone is that just--just a brand new kid on campus.

John Kasich: [00:06:30] Well I mean you know--it seemed kind of natural to do it. And and then he told me he was going to go have a meeting with Nixon. So I asked him what you do as a college president. And then he told me--I said I'd like to go with you and have a little chat with Nixon and he said no. I gave him a letter and then he gave it to Nixon and Nixon wrote me back a letter inviting me to the White House [crosstalk] basically for me to go down and have a chat with him.

David Axelrod: [00:06:53] And then you got to the White House and you are going to have your little photo op the president and what did they tell you.

John Kasich: [00:06:59] They said five minutes. I said I'm not coming out in five minutes so I was there 20. You know I think back why did he have me there. And when I think about it, this was in the fall of 1970. OK so in the spring of 1970, we had Kent State.

David Axelrod: [00:07:14] Yes.

John Kasich: [00:07:15] And so when I look back I said why did he do this. I think it must have been because he was trying to get an assessment of what was happening on the campus. I--it's the only way I could figure it out.

David Axelrod: [00:07:25] Did they think did the visit get any publicity?

John Kasich: [00:07:28] [unclear] Yeah I mean it got some you know.

David Axelrod: [00:07:30] Maybe part of it was he wanted to demonstrate that he was having a dialogue with the student from Ohio.

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO INSTITUTE OF POLITICS & CNN PRESENT

THE AXE FILES

John Kasich: [00:07:35] I mean I can't remember how much press but I know it was in the local paper and you know I mean the Ohio State paper and maybe some of the papers back--

David Axelrod: [00:07:44] What was your impression of Nixon in that conversation?

John Kasich: [00:07:48] I don't remember that very well but I did have another opportunity where I had a really a different--I mean a real impression. In 1987, I ran into a guy--

David Axelrod: [00:07:58] Who now you're a congressman.

John Kasich: [00:08:00] Yes now I'm a congressman so that's 17 years later. And I meet this guy at this reception and he had an odd name and I said kind of name sounds so familiar. Did you know Nixon? He said yeah I did work for him. I said well wait a minute I think I know your name. And I went to see him I told the whole story and I said do you ever see Nixon? He said yes and I said well tell him, I got to be a congressman. So he called back a couple of weeks later he said Nixon is going to be in town and he'd like to see you. So I went to see him. And I remember the one thing he said to me is learn foreign policy. He told me that. And then he said is there anything I can do for you? And I said there is. My mother and father had just been killed by a drunk driver. And my sister was having a very hard time and I said would you write her a letter. David, that you should see the letter he wrote to her. It was unbelievable, handwritten a couple of pages and I mean it was really pretty remarkable.

David Axelrod: [00:08:57] You know the thing about that I'm sure people who are listening and everybody you know people in public life have whatever it is the the image they have is what how people see them and he will forever be defined by those dark days of Watergate and so on. Well by the way when those things happen . . .

John Kasich: [00:09:19] He'll be defined by it. But I also think that as time has marched on people are giving him credit for really being a brilliant man. Aside from that.

David Axelrod: [00:09:28] Yeah.

John Kasich: [00:09:28] And you know I think it was I think maybe he was an insecure man.

David Axelrod: [00:09:33] Well that's--

John Kasich: [00:09:33] And he was only as good as the people around him. So if he had decent people around him, he probably would have had greater success but he didn't. And he had people around him that took advantage of him and he went to or maybe people around him who would execute you know who knows. Yeah.

David Axelrod: [00:09:49] But here's the here's here's. When you when you were when the whole Watergate thing came down having been inspired by Nixon and having gone to see Nixon. How did you as a young man kind of internalize all of that? Were you a Nixon person to the end or were there was there a point where you said you know what this this troubles me?

John Kasich: [00:10:09] No because I can remember first of all. Because I had that meeting. I didn't go in there with my mouth ajar. It was like I felt like I'm going to have a meeting with the president. And OK. This is not that big. I never felt overwhelmed by it. And why McKees Rocks. You know everybody puts on their pants the same way.

David Axelrod: [00:10:31] That's your hometown.

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO INSTITUTE OF POLITICS & CNN PRESENT

THE AXE FILES

John Kasich: [00:10:31] Everybody kind of goes the same way we're all equal. So respect, but not you know not like oh my god this is the greatest guy or anything like that. I was there working for a Democrat at that point when Watergate started to happen and I remember going back in Washington as an intern. Yeah I was working for a guy who I met hitchhiking and with some of my buddies and he worked for JFK and who doesn't who's not fascinated by that story. So I asked him if I could take him to lunch he picked us up hitchhiking like three of us you know and drove us down to the beach. And so I said Could I take you to lunch. He said yes. So I went down to see him. We went over to a place called Duke Zeeburt's which was this really nice restaurant and we went in and I looked at the menu had I looked at him and I said sir I can't buy lunch. I don't have enough money. But, he was a Democrat and he was very close to Lawrence O'Brien. And that next summer I couldn't get a job and he hired me and I went down and spent time with him and he was lobbying for the Alaskan pipeline. So I got to meet a lot of Democrats. I think I met Tip O'Neill that I met Bill Green remember.

David Axelrod: [00:11:49] This is why you're still in college.

John Kasich: [00:11:50] I'm still in college yeah. And so it was a great experience to Jack Murtha. I got to meet these guys and you know it was great. That's why with young people I try to tell them don't be digging yourself into a ditch here and put yourself in cement is that what your party is. You know be flexible about things.

David Axelrod: [00:12:07] Well, you're also your example should say to them: be audacious about look for opportunities because you banged on a lot of doors here. So the question was on Watergate.

John Kasich: [00:12:18] So anyway so I kind of you know I kind of I'm reading about this I go back to Ohio State and I remember telling people I think this guy's got a real problem. So I kind of felt it. And that's all I kind of remember about it. You know I kind of remember telling people no this is a real problem. And I think I can vaguely remember arguing with somebody who was telling me No no no no no and I said yes yes yes yes yes. So it wasn't as though I had become a some sort of a of a big admirer. But after 1987, I love to tell the story because I think it paints a part of Nixon that no one ever sees.

David Axelrod: [00:12:55] You know you were associated with the young class of members of Congress who were inspired by Ronald Reagan. Well there was a big difference at least in Reagan's presidency in that you know he talked about the shining city on the Hill and so on Nixon in 68. And you know Spiro Agnew you know was very much a part of this did appeal to a lot of fears that people had in the country and I wonder as you looked at the trip.

John Kasich: [00:13:29] See can't remember that. Yes. I was too young and I really wasn't following things too. But I remember that Agnew did say something about if you seen one one slum you've seen them all or so I mean it was or you know negative.

David Axelrod: [00:13:42] Nattering nabobs of negativism is a Pat Buchanan line. Pat Buchanan was the speechwriter who wrote the line. [crosstalk] But there's been this strain in our politics that we saw in this election and it it it does speak to the fears and concerns that people have about change about opportunity and so on. I mean it's an easy thing in politics is it not to sort of serve.

John Kasich: [00:14:08] Well think of Joe McCarthy. There's a book going to come out around Christmas written by a friend of mine who is well you will know and he he questions why Robert Kennedy was so close to Joe McCarthy. What was that all about? That was all about fear wasn't it. So I think it's come and gone in different streams in.

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO INSTITUTE OF POLITICS & CNN PRESENT

THE AXE FILES

David Axelrod: [00:14:30] I just read an interesting biography of Bobby Kennedy actually by Larry Tye that that speaks to that relationship and it's interesting the evolution that Bobby Kennedy went through from those times. So anyway I digress from your life story. So you went back you got involved with legislators and--

David Axelrod: [00:14:54] Well, what happened was I graduated from college in December and I was going to go to law school but I had to wait and I went looking for a job and I couldn't find one, I walked in the legislature and got hired there and then I became an intern which was a big like a top aide to a bunch of state senators and they did it for a while and then I quit and I ran for the state Senate. The guy that hired me in Washington, the Democrat, he made a campaign contribution to me and then when he found out I was running as a Republican. He demanded his money back. But--

David Axelrod: [00:15:24] Did you give some thought to running as a Democrat? Did you always know your'e going to run as Republican?

John Kasich: [00:15:26] No. I really never was because my view was Republicans were for maximum freedom for me. No bureaucracy, no standing in line, none of that stuff. And I kind of thought the Democrats were like OK wait in line here, we got all this stuff we're going to do. And it never appealed to me. And I honestly don't know why that is because my mother who influenced me a lot at that point in time I think she was a Democrat. My dad was a Democrat all of his lifetime. So why I became a Republican, I can't actually tell you. What is it that sparked that in me because I never met a Republican until I went to college because everybody in our town was a Democrat. It's kind of weird isn't it?

David Axelrod: [00:16:08] As you said though there was this culture there were culturally conservative Democrats who became what were known as Reagan. Yeah that's right. Reagan Democrats. So you're 26 years old first of all how do you--what do you--what exactly were you telling people when you were twenty five or 26 years old.

John Kasich: [00:16:25] It started when I was about running for this job at about 24 and a half. And I knew nobody and the party was not but I ran in the seat that they thought was not winnable. That's why they let me be the nominee. In fact the party recommended me as the candidate by one vote which is really pretty remarkable. I became--

David Axelrod: [00:16:42] Which year was this?

John Kasich: [00:16:42] This would have been probably was it like a night in. Then in 1978 and then but I started to campaign sooner than that because I didn't know anybody and I actually got to the point. I knew a few people in the town learned from there no. And I started calling.

David Axelrod: [00:17:01] So you were a 24 and a half year a kid from nowhere.

John Kasich: [00:17:03] Yeah.

David Axelrod: [00:17:05] That seems like a hard place to begin

John Kasich: [00:17:05] Well I would call people. I would say you know I'm going to run for the state Senate. I was probably 25 at the time actually I want to run for the state Senate. And and you know I want to you know want to reduce taxes and create jobs and grow the economy and I don't know what all I said but it was compelling. Now I would call out of the phonebook phone exchanges that I recognize were in a certain town and most people would hang up and then when they finally didn't hang up I'd talk to him for a while and I said can I come see you? And I drive to their house and then I would ask them to get their

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THE AXE FILES

neighbors in and then I would go in and talk to the neighbors about who I was. I think I think David it was nothing more than--

David Axelrod: [00:17:44] You're lucky the voters get a protection order on you.

John Kasich: [00:17:47] You know what I think it was I think that people thought this is a nice precocious young man. You know a nice looking young man who's got a lot of energy and what the heck why not help them. And so I won this stunning victory that no one thought I could win. And there I am in the legislature. In fact when I first went there they thought I was a page and some of the members didn't like me because I was so young and they were much older than I was. But you know one thing I learned is when you know things they can't question you if you're young and you don't know what you're talking about you have a problem. So I always try to know what it was I was talking about because I would have more information than the other people because I study it. And then you know I could I could fight with them the best of them you know including people in my party.

David Axelrod: [00:18:36] And you. But you also solved your problem of not hanging around there too long because you ran for Congress.

John Kasich: [00:18:43] Well what happened was I lost my district. [crosstalk] What was important is my first two years I beat the the president the Senate's best friend. So they would they wouldn't even run that not happy with you for two years they wouldn't even recognize me. Then we begin in the majority and I'm now the chairman of the health committee. So I made up my mind we got to get things done. So I learned how to work with Democrats and pass legislation and we wrote rewrote the state's medical board bill which was a big deal. And you know I learned how to do it. And by the way when we took over control the Republicans tried to have a tax increase and I said no I'm not voting for it. And they called me irresponsible so I wrote my own bill and that's how I learned that. And if you know the budget you know how things work. That's why I was interested in the budget. I don't care by numbers, it's all policy. The numbers just are a subset of the policy so I learned how the government works.

David Axelrod: [00:19:35] Speaking about numbers we've got to make ours so we're going to take a short break and we'll be right back with Governor John Kasich.

David Axelrod: [00:19:42] So you got redistricted out probably in appreciation for having thrown out the Senate president's best friend and you decided to run for Congress. What was that race like?

John Kasich: [00:19:55] I was the only one--who was the only Republican in America that defeated incumbent Democrat.

David Axelrod: [00:20:00] In '82 which was a terrible terrible Republican's, it was the first midterm.

John Kasich: [00:20:05] But I almost lost. I almost lost because of of a faux pau. Let me tell you David you appreciate this. My opponent voted for the nuclear freeze and we had the B-1 bomber being made part of it a big chunk of it in Columbus. So I said that because my opponent voted for the nuclear freeze he was basically voting to kill the B-1 bomber. And so Reagan gets up and he says Hey man his opponent you know this guy he voted to kill the B-1 bomber. How he did and he voted for the nuclear free so this guy beaten them he goes on it did a very effective commercial black and white and he goes on "John Kasich and his henchmen lied to the president the United States because I never voted against any other thing." And I like went way down. And then I squeaked through I came. I agree sir. I had a resurgence. And then I beat him. And I can remember that night David. I can remember driving to the campaign headquarters I could remember being in the car and saying to myself what has just happened. You mean I'm going to go to Washington that I'm going to be a congressman and I'm going to work with presidents. This was it

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO INSTITUTE OF POLITICS & CNN PRESENT

THE AXE FILES

seemed like it was surreal to be honest with you. It just was so unusual.

David Axelrod: [00:21:22] And you were what? Thirty years old?

John Kasich: [00:21:23] Yeah.

David Axelrod: [00:21:24] What did you what what did you learn when you got to Washington and tell me a little bit about what Washington was like when you arrived there?

John Kasich: [00:21:34] Well it was people could get along now you know I did get a committee assignment. So I I couldn't get any assignments because there was a low man on the totem pole. So ultimately I figured out a way finagled a way to get on the Armed Services Committee and I can remember my local reporter saying why would you ever want to get on that committee. I said well that's like defense that's like America that should be very interesting. So I got on that committee tip made it arrangement for me to get on there and he added a seat. So listen to this. I go on this little tour of my of my district and I go to this Air Force Station and I'm with this colonel and he's getting ready to retire and we do a nice tour and I'm sitting in his office why this happened I don't know. I said I'm going to leave. Is there anything you'd like to tell me. I never ask anybody that. All I said Is there anything you like to tell me. He said Well there is. And he pulled his drawer open and he goes you see this ranch. I said so what do you think I paid for it. I was. I said I don't know. Dollar and a quarter he goes. Ten thousand dollars. Then he pulls out this hammer and all his stuff. This was a part the stripped bare parts scandal. So I get all this stuff that he has and I go down to Washington and I go in to see Bill Nichols conservative Democrat from Alabama had his leg blown off in a war in World War Two. And I take all these tools in there and I go I sit in his office and I show him all this stuff. And he's he's got his glasses on and he doesn't know what to say and he pulls his glasses down over his eyes just like this and he looks at me says your mama. She doesn't have any more like you at home, does she? It was part of that whole spare parts investigation where I learned a lot about the military about the Pentagon I learned a lot and--

David Axelrod: [00:23:28] You said people could.

John Kasich: [00:23:29] --And I learned a lot about the fact that sometimes people didn't tell you what the truth was.

David Axelrod: [00:23:35] And you said people got along back then. Why did people get along back then and what happened?

John Kasich: [00:23:41] Part of that I think was the Democrats ran everything. So it was a comfortable situation. And you know we I never thought of it, but--

David Axelrod: [00:23:49] They didn't run the White House.

John Kasich: [00:23:51] No but they ran the Congress, so all the appropriations and all that stuff they get 90 and the Republicans would get some crumbs and I never thought of it that way because I had such a beautiful relationship with the Democrats on the Armed Services Committee because there wasn't a dime's worth of difference between the Republicans and Democrats. My problem I became a cheap hawk and I started to say we need to make sure we clean up the defense department. And Republicans really resented it. I mean they really resented what I was saying. I got to admire Les Aspin who was a great leader of our committee a brilliant strategist and a terrible secretary of defense. Finland really really a terrific guy and I learned a lot from you know and then I when I found the spare parts and everything I got on the conference committee as a freshman so I go to the first conference committee meeting and less and we're talking all ancient history so I hope no young people are listening. But there was John Tower

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO INSTITUTE OF POLITICS & CNN PRESENT

THE AXE FILES

and Barry Goldwater and John Stennis and Gary Hart and Teddy Kennedy. I mean it was like being looking at a history book. And what's his name from South--Strom Thurman. I mean one time I was sitting in there I'm I'm 30 years old you know maybe was 31 at that point. And I look at him. I said I love I feel like I'm looking at a history book. You know it was an amazing experience.

David Axelrod: [00:25:05] You said that out loud, how'd they take it?

John Kasich: [00:25:07] They didn't like that, they kinda of resented it you know.

David Axelrod: [00:25:11] So let me ask you you know you I remember you as a young. You were very you were because you were voluble then as you are now you were on television a lot you were talking about stuff and one of the things that was said was that you were kind of an irascible guy. And I'm wondering--

John Kasich: [00:25:27] What does that mean.

David Axelrod: [00:25:28] Edgy, a little irritable, sometimes.

John Kasich: [00:25:29] Yeah. Well you know you come from a McKeyes Rocks where nobody ever gets anything. You fight your way up to the top. You were saying I was audacious. Well hell yes if I wasn't audacious I'd still be living in McKees Rock.

David Axelrod: [00:25:42] You tried-- I saw one one time you unless this is so you tried to fight your way on to the stage at a Grateful Dead Concert.

John Kasich: [00:25:48] Now that's a little that's a little bit of a misnomer but it was a great story.

David Axelrod: [00:25:52] No, it's too good. Don't ruin my story, I love this story.

John Kasich: [00:25:54] I'll tell you when--wait--they put it in USA Today they had this thing called the congressman and the dead and my wife who was my girlfriend at the time was at home and she saw the CNN story about there I was at a Grateful Dead concert. She called up and said hey what the hell were you doing down there. But no, I would say David--

David Axelrod: [00:26:12] Well, what happened at the Grateful Dead concert.

John Kasich: [00:26:14] Well look I got a call from a friend of mine by the name of Dwight Yoakam who was a cashier and I knew Dwight and he called me up and he said I'm opening for the Grateful Dead at RFK. And I said Dwight something happened to the telephone because I didn't understand it. He says we'll come see me [crosstalk].

David Axelrod: [00:26:31] You talk about crossing lines.

John Kasich: [00:26:34] Exactly. So I said I'm not going and he says I'm going to send the car because you're going to come see me perform. So I went backstage and they got me passes and everything. And so Dwight performed I was on the side of the stage you know these stages are very big. And we went in into his dressing room and he said I'm leaving and I said why not leave and I've never seen a great film really so I'm going to stay. So I had all these passes I tried to get back up on the stage and a guy is yelling at me and I'm like no no no it's not it's like loud at a concert right. So some Washington Post reporter said you know what you were doing you got kicked off the stage at a Grateful Dead concert and that's really the story. It's not a big deal.

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THE AXE FILES

David Axelrod: [00:27:09] On this notion of audacious you left Congress and you ran for president in 2000.

John Kasich: [00:27:16] Well you know remember I also became got on the budget committee and started offering budgets against my own president and I fought for 10 years to get us to a balanced budget. At the same time I was trying to limit the production of the B-2 bomber. At the same time I was trying to reform welfare for the for the corporate welfare for the rich and I worked with Ralph Nader and I mean it was really great to meet him.

David Axelrod: [00:27:36] Did you meet him at the Grateful Dead Concert?

John Kasich: [00:27:37] I had not but he did sing a little bit. But when he was on Sesame Street he did sing a song that was really great. Too bad it wasn't recorded a day that I would say that and that you know I had to be really pretty darn aggressive because if I wasn't I've always been an iconoclast. And and so you know but I think--

David Axelrod: [00:27:58] So, what made you decide to leave Congress and run for president?

John Kasich: [00:28:02] Because I was done with Congress. I'd got the budget balanced. We limited the production of the B to it when the campaigns were getting increasingly negative. And you know it was just it was a grind. And the guy who was my chief of staff who had helped me in my first campaign he and I talked and I decided like in 1996 I really didn't have any more campaigns in me so I left and he and I kind of said yeah let's get the hell out of town. So we left and I was really sick and tired of the place and look in anything in life you go up. It's better to get out on your way up than on your way down. So I never knew that I was going to campaign for president was you know it was ridiculous out there. And what I found out is these guys that talked me into it and looked I had some good supporters I had the Don fierce who's a great political strategist I think you probably know who he is. Eddie Gillespie was my best guy. I mean even had the press guy for for really Rubio this last time, Todd Harris I mean I had guys in the White House. I mean it was but I could not raise any money it was that it was ridiculous but-- So I just moved on.

David Axelrod: [00:29:11] Yeah. A couple of other guys named Bush and McCain in that race as well.

John Kasich: [00:29:14] Yeah, I just couldn't get anywhere. And I'll tell you what. There was an early poll that showed me starting to rise in New Hampshire was when the war started in Kosovo. And I remember flying on the plane and McCain was on wall to wall coverage and all of a sudden I told my people I said you know this isn't going to work because he's got sucked all the oxygen out of the room. So it got down to McCain and Bush and and Bush considered me for vice president. And then he called me and he said the problem is if you and I run together we we're likely to blow the roof off of any place we walk in. So that was an interesting thing because I endorsed Bush and frankly I really should have endorsed McCain. And I don't know why he did that. And I've had apologized to John.

David Axelrod: [00:29:54] Well you made up for it by voting for him in the last election, right?

John Kasich: [00:29:57] I know but I was a few years there where I think he was pretty angry at me although he'd never admit it but I think he was. But anyway I love John so and I know.

David Axelrod: [00:30:05] You you spent you spent the next so many years in the investment banking business.

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO INSTITUTE OF POLITICS & CNN PRESENT

THE AXE FILES

John Kasich: [00:30:11] I worked for Lily-Rose and it was very hard.

David Axelrod: [00:30:14] And at FOX news.

John Kasich: [00:30:16] Yeah I did that I have a speaking career I wrote another book bestseller I think or two and then I also taught I did a lot of academia. I was at three different universities on a short time basis. I served on some boards. I was really really busy. And the Lehman Brothers thing was really amazing because they expected me to get up there and I don't know what the hell they expected but I told them I said I'm not giving you any Rolodex. I want to be involved. I want to learn the business I had to take all the tests and I want to be and what I found in that job is that I could do things peer to peer where they couldn't because bankers tend to be suck ups and I wasn't I could tell a CEO what are you doing here you know now I wasn't going to crank out all the numbers but you know I had I think a pretty significant impact in terms of being in management and all that I--these guys didn't.

David Axelrod: [00:31:06] Somebody needed to tell them Lehman Bros obviously ran into trouble somebody needed to tell them the subprime stuff.

John Kasich: [00:31:13] Yeah. See I wasn't doing that it [crosstalk]. No I was--And most people would think a guy like me would come out I'd be sitting in the board room or. That's not what it was like a you know they didn't even respect a former politician.

David Axelrod: [00:31:27] What happened though? I mean, tell us about Lehman Brothers. But in the industry--

John Kasich: [00:31:31] Greed, greed. They they kept taking all these bad loans and packaging them together and selling them and all this was just like it was like stacking one chair on top of another where you know the first four might work but when you get up to about 12 it's about time for the for the chairs to tip over.

David Axelrod: [00:31:49] I know you were in -- and doing other things there but did you know could you know sense that this was happening?

John Kasich: [00:31:57] Well I can remember when the stock was well over 100 and it started dropping and. And I was in -- I didn't even work in New York. Really I worked in a two man office in Columbus and I would I could talk to a few people in Chicago and they said well this is all going to be OK. And then it went under you know and we all lost a lot. Did I understand that. No I probably I did not really get exactly what was happening.

David Axelrod: [00:32:23] So there's all this clamor right now about regulation. Presumably there is a need for some of that.

John Kasich: [00:32:29] Yeah there is.

David Axelrod: [00:32:30] To try and make sure that that--

John Kasich: [00:32:32] These redit default swaps which are you know they're they're just all risky things. And yeah I think there is a legitimate need for regulation but if you go too far I think Dodd-Frank went so far you haven't seen any little banks get created here and that's not good. Community banks little banks they're the glue in our community. So if they were going to they need to fix this whole thing of Dodd-Frank. But they don't need to. They don't need to get rid of all of it.

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO INSTITUTE OF POLITICS & CNN PRESENT

THE AXE FILES

David Axelrod: [00:33:00] On Fox News real quick because I want to talk about your book and I want to talk about where we are today. You know you talk in your book to pass America divided or United. New book great read. I hope people pick it up about the media climate in which we're in. Fox is very much a part of that media climate. There are you know there are outlets on the left and right.

John Kasich: [00:33:27] David it was so unusual when I was there the first thing how did I get this job. Well I went around to all the networks I said I'd like to do a show on heroes and they go Well why would we put you on CNN. Blew me off MSNBC really didn't even give me the time of day. PBS. Forget it. And I did not know Roger Ailes and I walked in oh how a guy I didn't know and I walked into his office and I said I'd like to do a television show on Heroes. And I don't want to do anything political. And he goes OK well I'll give you a one year contract we'll test you out. What should we pay you. So I gave him a number because now it's ridiculous we're are paying you that so he gave me a difference. I didn't have an agent or anything. So I did it for a year then they hired me on I don't know two or three consecutive three year contracts. I had my own show for four and a half years but I did basically from Columbus called Heartland. It was on a Saturday night. And then I hosted O'Reilly for about I don't know eight or nine years. In fact they called me to host O'REILLY When I was still in Congress and I even host Chris Matthews Show when I was in Congress. I have no idea--

David Axelrod: [00:34:35] They haven't called you recently about that because you know well no opening there recently.

John Kasich: [00:34:38] Well the problem is that when I was there David. This is what's really interesting. Whenever I would host the show it was always you had to find the other point of view. It was never that you could go on there and get somebody that would agree with you. And so it changed over time when the host started getting people to become sycophants for their point of view.

David Axelrod: [00:35:01] Well TV it became a little bit more and part of FOX you know certainly became more like radio.

John Kasich: [00:35:08] Yes. I mean but when I was there I did. It wasn't like that. I mean I never did O'Reilly whenever I had a guest on there to say oh yeah I agree with you. It was always contentious. That's what made it so hard because I would basically study up on the show. I would help pick. I would help pick the subjects when I did O'Reilly and then I would study on the show for a few to three hours and then I would debate people and I mean I'm debating lawyers on complicated legal cases I'm not even an attorney. It really was an intellectual challenge the same way that Lehman Brothers was an intellectual challenge you really had expand yourself. And I got to be pretty good at it. By the end because what you learn in television is you have to let go. I mean it's like learning to swim. If you don't let go you won't be good. But letting go is hard when you're doing television. Because I was that's what it was was. That was the biggest challenge. And then I really I did enjoy it. But when I decided to form an exploratory committee I had to leave and I--

David Axelrod: [00:36:04] Do think that--well let me take a short break and we'll be right back with the governor Kasich. Do you think that how much responsibility do these--does this sort of polarization of media? I think [crosstalk] FOX news contributed to our sort of the intolerant nature of our politics?

John Kasich: [00:36:22] But everybody is trying their little their little groove. And David I think there's a responsibility of people not just to make money but to contribute to the discourse. And if all you want to do is to narrow yourself then you ought to say it. I guess but I don't know why you'd want to do that. But I mean it's all about audience it's all about ratings it's all about money. And Michael Novak the great theologian who we have recently lost said that any free enterprise system that is not underlaid by a set of values is bankrupt. And I think sometimes our media's chasing dollars now and there I think many of them

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THE AXE FILES

feel like they are that they are they're walking walking walking and they were slipping into a into a big deep cave and they were grabbing onto the sides tearing out their fingernails trying to figure out how to survive. And when people get like that it's pretty, it's crazy. And now of course they're all making so much money because of what they call what they call it now the Trump Bump/ I just heard that phrase today.

David Axelrod: [00:37:23] Because Donald Trump understands that media environment probably as well as anyone else. I mean he came out of that environment and certainly has no problem in letting go as you say and his ability to command that environment without any guardrails or concern was part of the key to his success.

John Kasich: [00:37:43] Totally remarkable. I mean if I said some of the things that he said I would I would be I would have been run out of Ohio. I mean it. I cannot explain it. Maybe you can explain it but I don't understand how people looked the other way and didn't care about some of these very incendiary things that were said and in the way at that point not only him but others behaved.

David Axelrod: [00:38:05] So what does it say about our political environment that that he won and where are we going with it now because he hasn't really changed. I mean he's approaching the presidency in much the way he approached his campaign. You commented and we were talking to the students about your concern about his remarks the other night in Pennsylvania, in Harrisburg on his 100th day anniversary how divisive those remarks were.

John Kasich: [00:38:32] I don't know where we're going to tell you the truth. I mean his supporters are rock solid but they're not a vast number. I mean it's certainly not half the country. What I have found as I travel around on this book or when I just travel around period is that people come to me and many of them are just almost begging me to get to run for run again. You know they're just like we believe. I mean there is a there is a certain passion connected to it that it has. I've now gotten used to it. But in the beginning kind of shocked me. You agree with that. I got a friend sitting in the studio with me David. It's been--

David Axelrod: [00:39:09] His friend is nodding. For those of you who can't see.

John Kasich: [00:39:11] Well, you know, he always nods because he's my friend, right? But not necessarily. I have been [crosstalk] taken away. I've been. I was. I don't think people want that. I don't think his people want it. His people may want to take these strong positions but these polls indicate that everybody would like to see people get along better. But we're not getting along in it. You know the whole the whole society is fine.

David Axelrod: [00:39:35] Well let me beg the question about people begging you. So let me beg you for an answer which is how seriously are you entertaining this? And can you see a scenario under which you would be a candidate again?

John Kasich: [00:39:49] I you know look [crosstalk] Look my folks advise me because my inclination is to say I'll never run for anything again. OK. And they say why do you say that John. You don't know what the future is going to be and they're right. So I don't know. I'm not planning for it. No. Do I have a political organization still active. Yes. Why. I want to have a team of people that can help me to have an effective voice. Because when you're talking about complicated issues like North Korea or you're talking about health care you're talking about these things you don't want to just talk. You want to know what you're talking about and therefore you have to have a team. And how do you get your voice into the media. How do you do that? I mean it takes effort.

David Axelrod: [00:40:32] But there is this anticipation that it's possible that you could run that as part of

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THE AXE FILES

the interest that you draw when you're out there.

John Kasich: [00:40:39] I think that I think that's right. The question is you know because I've thought about this. Can you be an important voice without holding public office. And when I think about it well we know what Al Gore's done. But he was vice president. I mean he changed the whole business of the environment. Colin Powell does he have a lot of say. I think so. ROBERT GATES Yeah I mean I think there are some but I think it's extremely difficult to maintain a voice if you're not holding an office. Now you're trying to do that. You have a voice and you know it's difficult. But you know can it be done. We're sure as heck going to give it the best we can to see if it's possible.

David Axelrod: [00:41:18] Let me just ask you about health care. You've been an opponent of the health care bill that's been moving through the house in various iterations and I want to ask you about a specific part of it I know it's the Medicaid piece that is particularly concerning to you but you have some personal history and you mentioned some of it about your parents being killed by a drunken driver. And I know that you have other family members who've dealt with mental health issues. Are these and you've been very active on these issues as governor.

John Kasich: [00:41:50] Not not not on the drunk driving thing, I mean look--.

David Axelrod: [00:41:52] But on substance abuse and mental health issues.

John Kasich: [00:41:56] Not necessarily, because I've been personally touched by it. I mean I don't have any disabled children but yet I have passion about it. And look when I look at the health care bill, here's what I think about: I think what would it be like if I didn't have any health care. And so I figure if it would be a nightmare for me I know it's a nightmare for others. What can I do while I'm in power to get something done. Let people feel some sort of confidence. And that's why I've done what I've done. Because I think the getting people this health care in a comprehensive way makes sense. And so I'm not I mean I'm concerned about the Medicaid but I'm also concerned about the exchanges. I don't want to see them collapse. That's how a lot of people who are above 138 percent of poverty are getting help. And I don't want you know Robert Taft Mr. Republican you know in Ohio in 1939 to 1953 Rand for the nomination for president against Eisenhower and lost. You know what he said. He said any in our country our great country of America if somebody can't afford health insurance we ought to give it to them now somehow because I care about these folks and I expanded Medicaid that somehow I'm not a Republican or a conservative. I think it's total nonsense. But you know what. That's the way it goes.

David Axelrod: [00:43:14] Yeah. But it does speak to I mean you you were considered a leading House conservative when you were in the Congress [crosstalk]. But the question is not whether you have evolved but whether that party has shifted away?

John Kasich: [00:43:31] Well I think there's a little of both. I think I have evolved a little bit but I would also tell you that back when we were reforming welfare I said if we're going to reform welfare for poor people we ought to reform welfare for rich people. So there's always been an element of that David and when you come from McKee's rocks you know quickly. My mother one time went up to check on us getting these pony rides up at the schoolhouse and I got one and she gave the guy that was offering him more money than it costs for the ride. And I said to my mother why did you give them all that money. She said Johnny did you notice his I mean he needs our help. I mean we we don't have a lot of money but you know what he needs something. So we're going to help him so that sense of fighting for the underdog. That sense of sticking up for people who other people don't stick up for. I think I grew up with that and you know and I'm proud of that.

David Axelrod: [00:44:21] Let me ask about Trump as a as a you didn't vote for him though. That was

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THE AXE FILES

very public. Is there anything in the last 100 days that makes you rethink that position?

John Kasich: [00:44:34] No no. I mean now I'm going to be for him because he's president. I mean I was for--I support presidents but that doesn't mean and I I've always supported presidents but that doesn't mean I go along with them on everything. So I've been critical. Look I voted against U.S. troops in Lebanon when Ronald Reagan was president. I offered my own budget against George Bush Sr. when he was president. I am not going to go with Bill Clinton. I had my differences with him but that doesn't mean I have to root against them or hate them or not have any respect for them. One of the greatest outrages that I've ever seen in politics is when that one guy Congressman yelled when Barack Obama was making a state of the state or state of the Union speech and yelled "You lie" [crosstalk] and turned around the next day and sent out an e-mail raising money for his behavior. Disgraceful. Apparently he went to a town hall meeting and they were all yelling at him you lie. Sometimes you know the arc of justice sometimes takes time, doesn't it?

David Axelrod: [00:45:36] So you're done with your term in 2019, I guess you leave office in January. And what what do you how do you see yourself spending your time?

John Kasich: [00:45:48] You mean for the next 18 months?

David Axelrod: [00:45:50] No, I mean after.

John Kasich: [00:45:50] I don't know; I just don't know. I really I have not really spent a lot of time about it. I have a great friend that says John just finish your job. Keep your mind off of it. And by and large how I don't I think here's what I know that I have to have a strong finish to my for so for my own self respect and all that which I'm going to do. And I just don't know. I hope things will come my way. But there's nothing more ex or more former than a politician.

David Axelrod: [00:46:20] Yeah although this propitious timing because the midterms will be over and you'll really be able to assess what the political climate of the country is.

John Kasich: [00:46:28] Yeah but I don't think that I'm not waiting for that so I can figure out my political stuff. I do want to keep a voice. I do want to assemble a team. And but you never want to say never to anything. You never know. I mean I'm still thinking maybe I'll get on the PGA Tour and not the senior tour. I mean that's how I look at life.

David Axelrod: [00:46:47] If that happens I'd forego the presidential race, if I were you. The book is [crosstalk] Two Paths. I'll do that. I'll do that. You'll play some nice course.

John Kasich: [00:46:59] One story I haven't told you is that I played golf with President Obama and John Boehner and Joe Biden. And when we finished we were sitting having a drink over at the at the Andrews Air Force Base and I looked around. I said Boehner you know you're the speaker of the house. I mean your father owned a bar. I mean come on man that you're here and I looked at Biden I said You vice president now let's come on with that. And then I looked at the president and I said in you President United States and make up as unbelievable I said so obviously the Lord had a purpose for us. Why don't you guys sit down and figure things. And that is what commenced those negotiations with President Obama and John Boehner. Now they never concluded it which was a shame but that's an interesting story. And that was a way in which people can get a better and better get together and think of themselves as human beings rather than his political enemies.

David Axelrod: [00:47:51] It's also a reflection of the greatness of this country because every single one of you in some way came from immigrant families who ended up making great contributions to this country

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THE AXE FILES

as I came from an immigrant family, my father was an immigrant. So we all share something that's larger than party which is of course the thrust of your book to pass America divided or United. John Kasich, thanks so much. Not just for being here, but for visiting with our students at the University of Chicago Institute of Politics.

John Kasich: [00:48:21] Great time, it's been a great time. It's great be with you.

David Axelrod: [00:48:24] Thank you.

John Kasich: [00:48:24] Thank you David.