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The Axe Files - Ep. 149: Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand

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Axelrod: [00:00:00] So good to see you. We just came from a session with students at the University of Chicago at the Institute of Politics and you noted that you said when you were seven years old that you wanted to be a senator which seems a little crazy. I mean I had my own crazy stories like that but not that crazy because there was politics in your family.

Gillibrand: [00:00:25] Right. So I'm sure when I was seven years old I was thinking of a state senator because there were certain state senators whose names I knew at the time. But I did have this amazing role model in my Grandmother who was a larger than life person she just was full of life.

Axelrod: [00:00:43] Her name was.

Gillibrand: [00:00:44] Polly Noonan Pauline.

Axelrod: [00:00:45] And I'm guessing Irish.

Gillibrand: [00:00:47] Yes Irish background. Yeah. And she and but also French Canadian. Her her mother's maiden name was cheekier and they came from trapper's in Canada. And a lot of folks in one of the French or Canadian trapper's married to a cane Indian woman and so are we have all sorts of heritage in my family. But my grandmother for whatever reason loved politics she grew up in the south end of Albany very poor part of all the very very working class never went to college and as a secretary. So for the time she was 18 she worked in the state legislature and so she was in this old Albany New York was such an interesting place for politics.

Axelrod: [00:01:33] On Roosevelt. Now Smith and Dewey and Herbert Lehman and all these great giants.

Gillibrand: [00:01:40] Yes. Gabriel Harriman in upstate New York in the 1900s was really the center of the world is because you have to remember early 1900s they had the Erie Canal to bring goods to the west and so it was this place of a lot of political leverage. And so my grandmother grew up in the early 1900s. I think she was born in like 1918 maybe. And when she was young girls she started working as a secretary. And of course then all the legislators were men and the sports staff were female. And I don't know how she got this idea but she realized that if she asked other women to participate in politics they could amplify their voices meaningfully. And they did that and formed a club. And over 50 years these women actually became powerful and you couldn't get elected in Albany without the blessing of my grandmother and her lady friends and Albany.

Axelrod: [00:02:33] You know we pride ourselves in Chicago for better or worse for having been the home of one of the last of the great big city machines. But Albany had this incredible Corning machine. He was mayor for what Erasmus Forni Erastus 40 years longtime long long time. [crosstalk] And so so of must have known him.

Gillibrand: [00:02:54] Yes she worked for him so the first person she was assigned to him or when he was a state senator she worked for him. And ultimately he fought in the war and then he came back and eventually ran for mayor and her job during all that time was just as a secretary of the state legislature. But she was in charge of the women's secretarial pool. And so when a new state senator got elected they'd be assigned somebody and my grandmother would find the right woman to assign and based on family lore you'd find the right woman for whatever the state senators was lacking and so if he was awkward you'd find somebody good with social norms if he was a terrible writer you'd find a great writer if

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he was really dumb you'd find someone smart. And so that's the kind he was on. You'd find someone honest honest to say you just find the right fit. And that was what she did. And as a consequence she just worked on campaigns every fall. And I just remember my most vivid memory is going into a campaign headquarters on a hot August day and seeing these women stuff envelopes. And I just remember they were all wearing sleeveless dresses like the one I'm wearing right now cotton dresses and they were stuffing envelopes and watching their arms jiggle just like mine just did. And I was thinking I want to be just like them because these women seem so amazing they were just self actualize they knew what they wanted. They were fighting for something they thought was important. And so I just breathed in this this feeling that politics and public service was important.

Axelrod: [00:04:22] And did you. Did you talk with your grandmother about it. Did she. Did you ever ask her why should I write this letter.

Gillibrand: [00:04:28] Well no I didn't have enough wherewithal or no reflectiveness to say why do you care about this stuff. But I learned from her that it was an extension of her values and I learned that because she only did a few things outside of her work life. And one was politics just helping candidates you know doing all the things you need to get someone elected mostly grassroots work. But she also did a lot of charity work for the church. And so these were the extensions of her and she would help drug addicted youth. She'd help anything that this one pastor at her church asked her to do whatever he asked she'd do. And so she just felt like the way she could help her community was service and service and public life. Yeah.

Axelrod: [00:05:21] That whole character of local government is so interesting because you know not that you guys aren't doing dealing with extraordinarily important things that touch people's lives in Washington but when you're involved in grassroots politics on a local level you're really doing problem solving at the most elemental level people come to you with all kinds of problems that touch on their lives in a really personal way. And then you use to solve the problem and use your relationships to help do that that's sort of what these local political organizations were based on back then.

Gillibrand: [00:05:55] You're totally right. And the way it was described to me when I was much younger is she knew which family the dad needed a job she knew which family needed a Thanksgiving turkey she knew which kid needed new shoes. Like it was almost like an extension of social services and that's what the party did and that's why you had ward leaders and you had people to know each block and all the voters on that block but you knew them as families and what their needs were those different era very different types.

Axelrod: [00:06:26] And when you knocked on that door and said And. Now we need you. People responded on that basis. Nancy Pelosi was here some time ago. And of course she's the daughter of the mayor and sister of the mayor of Baltimore and I said Well would you learn from your father. She said I learned how to count. Ha ha ha she said We always knew where our votes were and we knew that ok wasn't a yes and you know things that obviously still benefit her. Today you were among her flock when you were in the House of Representatives. She is she is she. She obviously picked up some skills back then but you didn't you didn't go. Directly into you and you were on that path.

Gillibrand: [00:07:12] No no. I was as I said to some of the students a lot of times young women are our own worst enemies because we're our worst doubters. And so I didn't really admit I wanted to be a public servant and in elective office again for about 30 years since the time I was a young girl. And so it I became a lawyer. My mom's a lawyer. I loved the way she could navigate the law. She was one of the few moms amongst my girlfriends that worked outside the home and she was a role model for us and I think we all admired her self-confidence and her ability to navigate tough legal issues and she did a lot of family law helping someone buy their first home or adopt a child. And so I wanted to have those advocacy

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skills too so I went to law school.

Axelrod: [00:07:59] And let me just stop you because I let something go that I shouldn't let go. Which is you talked about your grandmother's faith and how important that was to her. That's important to you as well. You've spoken about that. And even today you you are involved in the congressional. Is it not the prayer breakfast and the bible study.

Gillibrand: [00:08:21] Yes so I. I grew up Catholic and Catholics for me. I never doubted God I always believed in God it was sort of born into me as a young Catholic child but still say that after 10 years in Washington. Yes. But as an adult I really struggled when I was young and single in New York City and the way I worked through personal struggles as I started going to a new church and it was actually a evangelical church different kind of service different kind of preaching. But I really liked it because it was much more intellectualized it was here's a passage from the Bible. This is what it means. This is how it applies in your life. And that really resonated with me. So I started doing a Bible study I did it for seven six years in the city. I started teaching a Bible study for 10 year olds that was really fun. And I did volunteer work on weekends. I actually volunteered for a couple of charities raised money for the Little Sisters project which was helping women who are incarcerated reintegrate into society. Did a mission trip to Mexico City did all sorts of interesting things. When I was young and single and over the last few years in the Senate I never really got back into that. Once I got married and started having kids. Church was more something I was trying to inculcate in my kids. I you know helped them get the first communion that kind of stuff but didn't really. Make it part of my daily life until about three years ago. And I got invited to go to the prayer breakfast and when you get invited you're supposed to tell other senators what faith means in your life. And why is your faith important to you and so I told my personal story and I realized that this pre-breakfast actually didn't really start only 30. It says eight o'clock on schedule but as I start to 8:30 and I can go at 8:30 I couldn't go to it because I bring my kids to school so I didn't think it was something I could do because of my responsibilities as a mom. And so once I realized I was like oh I can go every week. And so I started going every week. And since I've been going I've started taking Bible study as well and really enjoying my colleagues on this level and.

Axelrod: [00:10:27] I wanted to add just what I wanted to ask you about there's so much partisanship in Washington and there's so much rancor in Washington today and in our politics generally. Do you find through your involvement in this Bible study that you are that you're relating to your colleagues in a in a in a different way and does it translate into your work as a senator. Could you find yourself working more effectively with them because you have this thing in common.

Gillibrand: [00:10:55] Yes. And it's a really great thing you can do that helps you reach across the aisle and not only understand the person as a legislature as a legislator but actually as an individual. And so as a consequence I've done a lot of good bipartisan work with some of the men I've met some of the senators I've met through Bible study which is exciting because you find some additional common ground and you build a relationship of trust that's based on your personal relationship not just your body and your own are and you disagree on me basic things. And as you know I really see our job to really help people and that's really informed by my faith. There's a there's a passage in the Bible called The parable of the talents and a master gives his servants some pieces of money they're called talents each piece. And so he gave gives a couple of servants some pieces and he says I'm going to go away and I want you to invest this money and I'll come back. And so one servant invest the money and doubles it. And he's like great servant I'm so proud of you. I'm so grateful to you. You've you've made me proud. And the second one also increases the money not as much but the third one buries the money. And just as I was afraid if I lost the money you'd be angry. So here it's back. And the master was really angry at the servant because he wasted his talents and the way I read that parable is God gives you a lot of things he gives you a lot of gifts a lot of opportunities it gives you intelligence he gives you to me he you know gave me a wonderful family gave me lots of opportunities and I really believe if you're not using those talents to help people

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and make a difference in their lives and do good things that you're not doing what you were put on this planet to do. And so that has really informed me and that's fundamentally what gave me the courage to run in the first place.

Axelrod: [00:12:39] Talk about just the interim you went to law school and then you practiced law a kind of law did you practice.

Gillibrand: [00:12:43] I was at a big white shoe firm in New York City Davis Polk. I was there for about eight years and I left to go work for Andrew Cuomo at HUD which was a big big step for me and part of this process of getting involved in politics and get interested in politics.

Axelrod: [00:12:59] Did you find that your work at the law firm I mean given what you just said about values. Yeah. Did you feel unfulfilled doing the work.

Gillibrand: [00:13:08] Yes I did. I felt very unfulfilled and I felt like I wasn't making a difference and I wasn't helping people and I could help these big companies save money but I couldn't change the world or do good things. And so no matter how much pro bono work I did on the side I was starving for something meaningful in my life. Absolutely starving. And so I tried really hard to find a way into public service as a young lawyer and I kept failing. The first thing I tried to do was become a prosecutor I wanted to go work at the U.S. attorney's office so I tried the southern district in the eastern district. I didn't get hired by either one. And then I said well let's go the charitable route so I applied to the Ford Foundation the Carnegie Corporation the Rockefeller Foundation. I didn't even get a response letter. And then I thought [crosstalk] decided to go to the Navy. Right. And then Hillary decided to run for Senate. Like all of this my big chance I'm going to get a job on her campaign. I'm going to work full time for her. But I had no relevant experience so I didn't get that job. And so I just started getting involved in Democratic politics at the time and I went to one of our Women's Leadership Forum events and the speaker was Andrew Cuomo. And he gave this long speech about public service and why it was important to why being a Democrat mattered. So I kind of went up to him after it said well I would love to do public service but I think it's an insider's game and I don't know how to get for me to be in Andrew being the provocative man and he has said well what do you do. I said well I'm a seventh year associate at Davis Polk and he said will you move to Washington. And of course totally lying. I had no interest in ever moving to wash thinks I was young and single living in New York City so why would I want to move to Washington. But he said OK then my staff will call you. And so sure enough they call me the next day go down for an interview the next week I get a job on the spot to be a special counsel. And I said well I'll let you know tomorrow. And so I go home that night and I talk to my then boyfriend now husband and Jotham this really simply is like all you've ever wanted do is public service since I met you you've got to take this job screw Davis Polk. They don't need you. And I'll see you on weekends. Just go. And so he makes things easy sometimes for me and I was like you right. And so I called the Polk's and I love you but I'm giving you two weeks notice. I'm going to Washington.

Axelrod: [00:15:18] You never had a moment of saying yourself why does my boyfriend want to get rid of me.

Gillibrand: [00:15:22] No no. And the good news was he came every weekend and absence made the heart grow fonder. We got engaged six months later. That totally worked. And so off I went to Washington but it was the very end of the Clinton administration. And so I only got seven months there and I loved it. And so what I learned by doing that is they really wanted the public service. And so because I got up from my bed everyday early I went into office. I stayed as late as I understand like I just loved it I think this is I'm helping people I'm making a difference and so it really fed my soul. And so when I came back I then talked to my then fiance and said well honey you know how you feel about public service and do you think we could raise our kids in upstate New York. And how would you feel about me running for you. He does

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venture capital so like asking someone who just got their MBA doing venture capital to move to upstate New York from New York City it is kind of a big question if he loved me anyway and he said yes so yeah he's certainly proven him. So we didn't move right away. Took us a few years to buy a home. I change law firms I didn't go back Davis Polk. I joined David Boies his firm because a lot of the work he was doing was Justice Elena Elena and that all gets you the one of these really cool cases. Of course I only did securities work but didn't matter.

Axelrod: [00:16:37] This was after the Gore Bush v. Gore.

Gillibrand: [00:16:40] One of my jobs was to watch every ounce of coverage on Bush v. Gore and understand the litigation that was happening when I was at high. But anyway so we joined Boies Schiller. But the great thing about B'way Schiller besides just amazing partners like David Boies and Jonathan Schiller and Don Flexner was that they had an upstate New York office. And so after a year I moved to the Up-State office practice law from Albany and then eventually ran for Congress.

Axelrod: [00:17:03] Yeah. My my old friend Rahm Emanuel was the head of the U.S. Congressional Campaign Committee. How did he. Did you find him or did he find you.

Gillibrand: [00:17:15] Oh he found me I was begging for his help. So I am a first time candidate in a two to one Republican district that no one thinks I have any hope of being successful except for my mother. And there was no way Rahm was going invest in my race unless I jump through at least five hoops. And so the great thing about that race was he kept putting. You know conditions on it if you raise this amount if you do this if you get Emily's List if you did do. So I did jump through five hoops to jump through all of them. And so eventually he's just had he had to say OK OK we'll support you. And so then I became magically the red to blue candidate which was really important that time and Ron was because of the resources that would be at least eligible to hit doesn't mean you're getting at least eligible. And so it was a two to one Republican district hard to win. That's. This was the wave election. And on election night when our race explain what you mean. So this was in 2006. It was the sixth year of George Bush's administration. We were mired in Iraq. And so even places that were two to one Republican upstate New York people were uneasy and they were really looking for oversight and accountability over George Bush and they wanted us out of Iraq. And so I ran on getting out of Iraq. I ran on ideas like Medicare for all. I wanted to have transparency and accountability in government. And that resonated. And so I was able to beat an eight year incumbent who was well-loved by George Bush in fact his nickname was Congressman kickass because he's the one who shut down the vote count in Bush v. Gore. He was the one who started the Brooks Brothers. John Sweeney. Oh yes. He started the Brooks Brothers riot. And so I ran against him and miracles do happen and I won.

Axelrod: [00:18:57] Now one of the issues that you faced when you made the transition to the Senate and we'll get to that in a second was that you also took positions that reflected your district on on. Issues like guns for example and you had an A rating from the NRA. Tell me what your thinking was in that regard and philosophically how do members approach those kinds of issues when there are differences between districts and differences between states and communities on these issues.

Gillibrand: [00:19:32] Well when I was a House member I really only looked at the issue through the lens of most of my constituents that saw guns as just a hunting issue. It was very culturally something that a lot of folks in that part of the state did. My mom liked to hunt. My brother hunted. You know there's a lot of hunting going on in Upstate New York. But I didn't actually take the time to understand the issue as well as I should have.

Axelrod: [00:19:55] And so you lived in New York City so you knew the guns can be used that that and that's why I really feel I should have been a lot smarter and a lot more sensitive. Could you've been

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elected though if you had taken a less of a supportive stance.

Gillibrand: [00:20:10] I don't know maybe who knows. It depends. I don't know. But what I do know is that when I was appointed to the Senate I needed to learn a lot more and actually be able to understand why you know my viewpoint really wasn't right. And so I spent some time right away after I was appointed in Brooklyn.

Axelrod: [00:20:33] And we should point out the you were appointed to replace Hillary Clinton. Now she became secretary of state. Let me just take a short break and we'll be right back with Kirsten Gillibrand.

Axelrod: [00:20:48] So we were talking about the transition from house to to Senate and how you think about issues right. As a senator from New York rather than as a member of Congress from your upstate district.

Gillibrand: [00:21:01] Well I felt I didn't I didn't know enough and I wasn't I didn't do enough for enough people and so I started to meet with families who had literally lived through gun violence. And one of the families I met with were the parents of Neisha prior yard who is a 17 year old girl who was shot by a stray bullet in Brooklyn when she was with her friends and two look those parents in the eye and hear their heartbreaking story. It's it's crippling. And yet there was nothing I wasn't going to do for that mother. There was nothing I wasn't going to do to say I will do everything in my power to make your child's life not be in vain and that I will fight to try to end gun violence in this community so it doesn't happen to somebody else. And so that pushed me to learn more about what actually needed to happen. This wasn't an issue just about hunting. In fact in New York 90 percent of the weapons used in crimes come from out of state and they're trafficked in illegally sold directly to gang members. No background check no gun show literally just sold out the back of a truck or a back of a car. And so I worked with Commissioner Kelly and I work with mom. We've got new york the Libyan police commissioner and moms against gun violence to come up with legislation that could help hopefully help. And so the first bill I wrote on it was anti gun trafficking bill to create real penalties for King. [crosstalk] We have a crime here in Illinois which is why you're former senator and I worked on it. Mark Kirk because he wanted to solve the same problems so we did the gun trafficking bill last Congress. And when we got to vote on it we got 50 votes. I mean we were this close to passing to passing it. Even in the divided Congress and so I am hoping to get to introduce that again because this will absolutely save lives.

Axelrod: [00:22:48] I mean when you go when you go home to your home community in upstate presumably you get confronted about this. What do you tell your constituents who do have concerns as hunters and who have a large NRA membership.

Gillibrand: [00:23:05] So this goes back to your other question you know could you have run on a different platform and I actually think you could have. Because people in upstate New York do not want criminals to have weapons they don't want guns being sold on the back of the truck directly to gang members. They actually want background checks they actually want to make sure people who are violent in their homes and beat their wives can't go out and buy a gun the next day they want to make sure terrorists can't have weapons they want to make sure criminals don't have weapons they want states to actually do their job and upload this data into databases. Background checks work. So I actually think the gamut. Common sense gun things gun regulations that I'm for that I want to pass would be supported by my old congressional district because they don't want gun crime either. They just don't experience it on the same level that somebody living in New York City or Brooklyn or parts of Albany or parts of Buffalo experience and they may live in it might live in a rural area and hunting is important to them. But having a background check doesn't impede their right at all of making sure gun trafficking is a federal crime with high penalties doesn't impede the rights at all. And so I believe I could win their support. Having that exact view today. So I didn't I just didn't I didn't work hard enough at the event and I didn't work hard enough at that issue

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and understand the issue well enough. And so I mean I needed to learn more. And and there are other issues like that that you didn't have that that you had one perspective on as a member of Congress because of the community that you served and a broader perspective when you were representing an entire state including the great metropolitan area there or immigration. You know my district was maybe 97 percent white some some immigrants but not a great deal of diversity in the district. And so I hadn't heard enough of the stories of how painful it is to have your family be torn apart because there's ice at their door. Like I didn't I had heard those stories or didn't try to. I mean I didn't do enough. I can. The reality is David I didn't work hard enough on these issues because it wasn't pressing on my door. And when I became a senator not only was it pressing on my door but I couldn't be a good senator unless I learned it understood it and tried to solve those problems because the problems are real. The heartbreak is real the the the terrible policies that break apart families are what President Trump is pursuing today. And I needed to learn that stuff. And if I was ever going to represent the state as a whole I needed to understand how hateful and hurtful some of these policies actually are. And I did not have a good enough or sophisticated enough understanding of those issues. Before I was nominated.

Gillibrand: [00:25:48] I asked you this when we were with the students a little bit earlier I want to expand on this a little bit. Why did Democrats fail in 2016. Donald Trump was the least popular president ever elected according to polling. Still not terribly popular today. And we'll get into some of the current events but but it seems like there was a massive failure on the part of the Democratic Party. I know you're friendly with with Hillary Clinton. I'm friendly with Hillary Clinton so I don't want to personalize it but as a party where the Democratic Party fail I think.

Gillibrand: [00:26:31] I want to answer that in two ways. First I just want to say I think Hillary did an amazing thing by running for president. And I can tell you she inspired millions of people millions of women and girls saw what it was like for a woman to actually aspire to the highest office in this country to fight as hard as she can or the things she cared about and to try to make a difference with her life. She inspired all of us. And I'm so grateful that she was willing to fight the fight to the very end.

Axelrod: [00:27:00] Do you think she lost because the misogyny caused her to lose that election.

Gillibrand: [00:27:05] I am not the Monday morning quarterback to tell you why they lost. There certainly is gender bias in all things. But we need to be successful despite that all of us do. Any woman who runs but I think Democrats failed because. And I take as much responsibility as anybody when I go to places that voted for Trump overwhelmingly which is most of my state. Hillary won my state because she won the cities but 62 counties and probably around 50 of them went red story all over the country. So a lot of readers a lot of my earlier all areas of my district always red, along lots of long island was red. I think Democrats needed to listen a lot a lot longer to what constituents were going through. And David this wasn't just about a campaign they felt they'd been left alone and unresponsive to and not been heard for a decade. This was since the collapse this was not a new phenomenon. They voted for President Obama twice and then switched to Trump because they didn't think anybody had their back. So it wasn't really a messaging issue or even a policy issue. It was they didn't feel anybody understood what they were going through and that was they didn't feel anybody was fighting for them. And that's all our responsibility by the way that it was even a decade long 20 years. I think that for 20 or 30 years when Bill Clinton ran in 1992 some of the forgotten middle class. These are not new issues but they've gotten worse for certain. And the prices are different. So. So the story I hear all across upstate New York you've got people constantly being laid off people in their 50s in your 50s and you get laid off. You are so rude. Who is going to hire you. Not only are these people discriminated because their age they're discriminated because they have experience. And so there are a higher cost employer employee and you know we talked about this a little bit about how the economy's not working for workers workers aren't being rewarded. We don't have the infrastructure around the economy to reward work like having a national paid leave plan or a living wage. Yeah these larger structural changes that we are desperate for that we've not delivered on those would

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make their lives better. Having our educational system actually be able to train you for the job that's available not just laid in you with debt huge problems in our in our ability to to actually use state schools and community colleges to hone skills directly for the job that's available in your community. That when we do that it works. We did it in upstate New York when somebody needed advanced welders. They called upon Adirondack community college to actually offer the coursework for the advanced welders they need. They said every graduate you give us will could give this job to 70 k your job. It worked. We need you more of that.

Axelrod: [00:29:49] Let me let me ask you one question about this. We didn't have time to get into it earlier when we were talking to the kids there is a profit motive to business you know you represented businesses when you were a lawyer and you've made the point and you're absolutely right that many of them are publicly held companies the larger ones and they have to respond to their shareholders. But we live in an age in which technology is churning at an incredibly fast rate and so many jobs that used to be able to be used to be done by people are now being done by machines a lot of jobs today that are available are running the machines that used to do that are doing the jobs that people used to do. What do we do about that.

Gillibrand: [00:30:37] Well you're not going to stop automation you're not going to stop technology that's going to keep plowing forward. But what you can do is encourage and incentivize entrepreneurialism innovation small businesses startups and all of that takes money. You need to increase access to capital whether you're doing it through credit unions or community banks or smaller banks but actually incentivize real lending to get money into these economies. The biggest successes we have throughout upstate New York which is a tough economy is when these schools are used as hubs for different industries. So Albany decided to be Albany nanotech 25 years ago and now it's got an AMD chip manufacturing facility that was a joint venture with U.A.E. called U.A.E. called GLOBALFOUNDRIES a billion dollar investment in Saratoga County that now has fallen semiconductor production in the hundreds of millions of dollars and almost every computer chip and high tech company now has a presence there because there's so much synergy there.

Axelrod: [00:31:38] So so what if anything should the role of the federal government be in all of that.

Gillibrand: [00:31:42] So one fight we had for example last year that was just a totally dumb fight was over Ex-Im Bank and what Exham the import export import bank what they do is provide different products for companies that need to sell their stuff overseas. So this is one example that was really funny was this company that produced pickles. And for some reason the Chinese love these pickles but the Chinese would say I can buy a thousand cases but I can only pay for 100. I need to sell the other 900 before I can give you the money. Grandma's pickles couldn't afford to send them a thousand cases without being paid. But Ex-Im Bank could commit committed say no no go ahead. Sell a thousand cases will insure you for the 900 that you aren't paid for. So you will give me the money if they don't give you the money. And so that company then can export overseas because this insurance project works to fight over stupid stuff like that because it's easily portrayed as corporate subsidies and that's how the opponents did which was opposed by Republicans which is ridiculous this was these were products that helped tons of upstate manufacturers. I went and visited them and talked to them. But it all goes to access the cap that access to capital David. And so the more we can make sure small businesses can get the money they need to invest. And sometimes it just takes a little bit of innovation and I'll give you another really awesome example. So another upstate bank called KeyBank. It had a woman CEO and she realized that a lot of women don't businesses weren't getting lending. Women started businesses with seven times less capital a mountain male owned businesses. So she is just going to start with three billion. I'm going to set aside three billion for wound on businesses. She's already on five billion is among our fastest growing portfolio. It's working. She just needs to take that risk but she had the vision to say I think there are good ideas in diversity and I'm going to look for those good ideas.

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Axelrod: [00:33:28] I would be remiss if I didn't speak about the sort of environment in Washington today and the stories that are consuming Washington I think the country or at least the news coverage in the country and that goes to this probe of Russian interference in the election potential ties between the Trump campaign and the Russians. You. By all accounts because it was a close meeting we're pretty outspoken in a meeting with Rod Rosenstein the deputy attorney general at the end of last week when he came in to brief you on his decision to appoint a special counsel but also the events leading up to the firing of of Director Comey at the FBI. What did you learn from that meeting and by all accounts you were frustrated with what you didn't learn. Right.

Gillibrand: [00:34:31] So I what I learned was that he knew before he wrote his memo outlining the reasons why he thought Comey should be fired he knew that the president was going to fire me which is a really significant fact. I was frustrated because he was selective in which facts he tell us in which facts he weren't. And they were all related to the same thing. So I was frustrated that he was making the calls about what he wanted to tell us what he didn't want to tell us based on an assumption that the special counsel. Mueller might decide to investigate that part as part of his probe into perhaps the Russian investigation.

Axelrod: [00:35:08] Well let me ask you about that. He himself Rosenstein is now a character in one potential element of this story because of his role in writing a memo writing isn't used as his reason at least initially. Yeah. Would he talk at all about that.

Gillibrand: [00:35:29] No. So that's why I asked him I said please clarify who asked you to write the memo because I wanted to know did the president asked you to write the memo. Did the attorney general who's supposed to be recused. Ask you to write the memo. I want to know who asked him and he wouldn't answer that question. And he said it could be possible. Part of Mueller's probe. And so obviously he's thinking or he must be thinking of whether there's an obstruction of justice charge and whether these actions could be related to it. But again I was just concerned because he was selective. How can you tell us you knew before you write the memo that the president was fired but not tell us who asked you write the memo. The part of the same fact pattern so just giving us facts doesn't doesn't impose upon the special counsel whether or not he's going investigate he's to make his own judgments if he believes there's obstruction of justice he may look into those issues. That's his decision and I believe we should look into obstruction of justice. I think this is serious concerns to be firing a FBI director in the middle of an investigation that relates to you and your administration is a serious issue.

Axelrod: [00:36:30] And since then we've also seen the reporting you have already the memos but you heard the report of it saying that he was asked to drop the flint thing and do expect that you'll see those memos eventually the Congress will see them.

Gillibrand: [00:36:45] Yes I think we'll see all of it eventually. I just don't know what the timeline will be. I don't know if the special counsel will want to keep those that information or memos under his investigation and not publicly available for a certain amount of time. That's what we don't know. But I certainly hope that the Senate Intelligence Committee and the Senate Judiciary Committee can complete their investigations and I also think we need to have a 9 11 style commission. I really believe that the separate issue is did Russia Hackler our election. Did they penetrate our electoral systems. Did they undermine any of our voting systems and voter registration. What were the. What was lacking in our systems that couldn't have prevented that. And what do we do to prevent it in the future. Which is exactly what the 9/11 Commission did. They said what happened and then they said what did we not have that we needed to have. And what do we need to build in the future to prevent a similar terrorist attack. We need the same analysis.

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Axelrod: [00:37:43] The frustration that you felt in that meeting with Rosenstein raised the question as to whether Congress will be frustrated in its efforts to really flush out what happened because some of the key witnesses now will be under lock and key until the special counsel finishes his work.

Gillibrand: [00:38:02] Right. So can we have Comey testify. Who knows what will the special counsel intervene and say no. I think both the Judiciary Committee and the Intelligence Committee were hoping to have Mr. Comey testify next week come in right away. So whether that would be in jeopardy we don't know. A lot of the senators did ask the deputy attorney general whether he could give us assurances that they would not be impeded and he kind of sidestepped that question and said that's really up to the special counsel.

Axelrod: [00:38:30] We're going to take another short break and we'll be back with Senator Kirsten Gillibrand.

Axelrod: [00:38:40] I don't want to run out the clock here time about Russia because we could do that for our hours but it is a fast moving story and as we sit here there were two new accounts that surfaced. One was notes from the president's now famous meeting with the Russian diplomats recently in which he said I just fired the head of the FBI. He was crazy. He was crazy a real nut job. I faced great pressure because of Russia that's taken off. How do you react to that.

Gillibrand: [00:39:19] Well it's. Absolutely serious. And again raises the question of obstruction of justice. But I'm also troubled by those meetings because he conveyed information that was protected top secret information that he wasn't supposed to disclose and that information was given to us by an ally that specifically said we can disclose this to the Russians and so that was very troubling as well.

Axelrod: [00:39:49] What message do you think he has now. And we don't know. We should as we should. Neither of us were there. These are you know this is reporting from the New York Times. We haven't seen any of these documents that from which this account is taken. But. As inappropriate as leaking classified information highly classified information may have been what's the appropriateness of speaking to these Russian diplomats about coming in this way.

Gillibrand: [00:40:20] I think it's outrageous. I don't know whether this will go into an obstruction of justice investigation. It sure reads that way. But that's what our special counsel is going to look at. And I think he must I think it's really important that the people of the United States don't have a doubt that our country is bought and paid for it is being undermined by a relationship or collusion with Russia. I think this whole meeting was problematic the fact that our press wasn't allowed but the Russian press was the fact that we really got the details of the meeting from the Russians that their photograph was the photograph we saw of the meeting not a White House photographer's photograph. Very strange.

Axelrod: [00:40:59] And so you I'm sure you were among those who and correct me if I'm wrong who were critical of the way Director Comey handled the information about the probe of Hillary Clinton and the e-mail and particularly his late entry into the race which has become quite controversial that he he said leaves him feeling slightly nauseous. You've heard the president say well look the Democrats were didn't like him and felt he acted improperly and there they have no station to speak on his behalf now or to say I did the wrong thing in firing them. What do you what's your response to that.

Gillibrand: [00:41:44] I think firing someone who's in charge of an investigation into your campaign and people who worked on your campaign for colluding with Russia is very different. And it looks like obstruction of justice you can be unhappy with what Director Comey did during the election coming out when he did with that timing when he didn't need to as something that was a serious problem. But this is on a whole new level. I mean it was shocking it was so shocking. The president of United States would

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first fire their director of the FBI because there's supposed to be the 10 year terms for a reason so they're outside of politics. So they're not part of who gets elected and who doesn't get elected. It's supposed to be between administrations. So to be fired in the first place is outrageous in the second place to be to have an investigation be ongoing and then to have statements like this if these statements are true these statements are true that he says that I faced great pressure because of Russia. It's hugely problematic so well and that the pressure was relieved because you fired him. And if and if it's true that he said to me I watched you did finish up the flint thing can you get rid of it. I mean if that memo was real and that's true these are horrible things and they all sound like obstruction of justice so I just think having a special prosecutor is really important for the American people. And I think we do need to get to the bottom of it. No president is above the law. And that's why you need a special prosecutor.

Axelrod: [00:43:15] Just a couple of last things on this. Additionally as we said here a story surfaced in The Washington Post that said the law enforcement investigation into possible coordination between Russia and the Trump campaign has identified a current White House official as a significant person of interest showing that the probe is reaching into the highest levels of government. What are you as an elected official do about that. What do you as a state senator do with information like this or do you just allow the special counsel's investigation to work is that is that where things are at now.

Gillibrand: [00:43:50] Well that's why you also have investigations by the Intelligence Committee by the judiciary. And that is our oversight role that's why we have these committees so we can do investigations.

Axelrod: [00:43:59] Do you have confidence in those committees.

Gillibrand: [00:44:04] I think they play a really important role. They may take more time they might take two years to do a review or three years. I think the the most targeted streamline review is by criminal investigators by the FBI. But I think better resourced as better resource full time people who are criminal experts say this is what they do. But I think it's important to have these congressional oversight committees they do play a function. They can make recommendations they can write a report that's available to the American people. A lot of the work that the FBI does will never be made available and if they don't find an indictment none of it will be made made available. So it's a different process a criminal investigation is really different from a Judiciary Committee Intelligence Committee investigation where they're going to write a report and produce it to the rank. So it's different functions different outcomes. Both are very valuable and that's why I also want to add the 9/11 Commission to do the bigger deep dive of are we vulnerable from a cyber perspective in our elections. And one of the 10 things we need to do to prevent it for 18 and 20.

Axelrod: [00:45:03] But the congressional leaders, Congress obviously being the hands of Republicans have resisted a commission. Do you have any reason to believe that that's going to change.

Gillibrand: [00:45:13] I think I mean I don't know all the details of these investigations are not on those committees but I do know there are Democrats and Republicans who are working really hard together to do their job and get to the bottom of it. And I believe that there are enough strong Republicans that they will insist on continuing these investigations issuing subpoenas getting documents and doing their work regardless of any pressure from other Republicans or from the White House. I think they'll do their jobs.

Axelrod: [00:45:39] What are your colleagues. I don't want to burst your prayer breakfast brethren and sisters in if that's a word but so I'm not suggesting that's where you talk about such things but what are your Republican colleagues telling you privately about this. I mean do you sense a high level of concern about this.

Gillibrand: [00:45:59] Yes. Everyone's concerned. This is something that's touching all of us because our

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constituents are concerned the American people are concerned. People are very worried and they need to know that no president is above the law and they need to know the Congress takes that really responsibly and is going to look to the very end to get to the bottom of it. They need to know that we're working for them. And I think that's how most people feel.

Axelrod: [00:46:20] Kirsten Gillibrand so appreciate you coming here coming in the University talking to these young people and spending time with me and I hope it's the first of many conversation.

Gillibrand: [00:46:31] Well thank you for having me. Really fun.