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The Axe Files - Ep. 152: Alfredo Corchado

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Axelrod: [00:00:00] You want to get your picture before we start. So let's just keep talking for us. OK. So when do you leave town.

Corchado: [00:00:08] I leave tomorrow I'm going to spend about 10 days in the Midwest Wisconsin Iowa Nebraska for the second book I see trying to kind of see the Mexican life under under Donald Trump. Yeah. That will be interesting. And then I'll get back to you.

Axelrod: [00:00:28] I'm sure you would know better than I. I bet you run into a lot of fear.

Corchado: [00:00:33] Oh yeah. Like I did a story 20 years ago and I'm going back to some of these communities. And it's funny how some of them guns to the Mexican consulate office and at first they were like yeah we want to talk about it but now it's they're not so sure and what are the conditions and how do we do the interviews. Yeah. I mean there is definitely much much more to fear. Yeah. Terrible.

Axelrod: [00:01:00] We all set Alfredo Corchado First of all let me say thank you for being here and for being at the Institute of Politics. You've really enriched the experience of students here by sharing your own. And we're grateful for that.

Corchado: [00:01:21] That's a two way street. Thank you for the opportunity.

Axelrod: [00:01:26] Talk to me about. Your life in Two Worlds in Mexico and in in the United States and how you how you've navigated those worlds.

Corchado: [00:01:41] I left Mexico at the age of 6. Kicking and Screaming. I didn't want to leave.

Axelrod: [00:01:47] Talk. Talk to me about why not. And what was your life.

Corchado: [00:01:51] We had a pretty good life. My come from my very small town in the northern part of Mexico where I think most of the people there depend on remittances from people working in the United States. And we were the lucky I mean among the lucky ones we had a small little grocery store we wouldn't. By any means but we had our own grocery store. I would test out the toys that we were going to sell before. Always had plenty plenty of food. My uncles had corn fields so it was a pretty sweet life though your father spent a fair amount of time in the States. Working fields Yeah doing well too. There was a program called the Braceros. Workers were the U.S. awarded more than five million contracts to Mexican workers to come and help with the shortage of people many many had agricultural agriculture work and railroads and other things. I mean there were people working in Pittsburgh Ohio Chicago obviously the southwest and California but it was it was helping hands settles. That's kind of a rough translation. And many of the fathers in my town were living in the United States among them my father he came as a 17 year old. He used to take care of cattle in Mexico but he hears all these stories of his own family members as he is the youngest. I think there were nine of them the youngest and he would hear these stories. I mean I think the first one in my family who left was my aunt in the nineteen forties and my father would think if my sister can make it you know I will too. And so forth. And so as I said you you work for a specific period of time nine months in the United States that was a usual contract. And then you went back home for the four winter break. I didn't really know my father. I didn't even call him papa. No father to me was Ellsinore. And he would come back every Christmas and kind of try to make up for time lost he was always stopped by you know PP-ASEL get some Tony L'amore boots and a little hat and say you know Miekeo and try to kind of I guess we connect doing those two or three months. And that was kind

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of you know. Wasn't really sad when he left it was kind of a weird thing you know you learn not to get too attached to to this stranger. But my father wired us to be connected be a family and his name is kind of interesting. If we look at that period because employers were really concerned that they would lose their workers. I mean there was such a huge demand for Mexican workers that he said you know every time you leave I'm afraid you're not coming back. So why don't we try to get you a green card. And then my father and I have a family back in Mexico. Well why don't we just bring the whole family with the green card. And that's how we ended up in the United States again. It was I remember crying. You know the days leading up to that you know that I would leave Mexico I would leave Durango. I mean I'm paved streets but the streets kind of felt like they belong to us. I mean my brothers and I we walked the streets to my grandmother's house to pick up the food. My mother was a singer in our town. One of the interesting things about. Working on this book was going back and reporting on my mother and people would say you know when your mother sang even the rooster stopped to listen you know little details like that that kind of gave me a sense of humor.

Axelrod: [00:05:57] You remember your mother singing.

Corchado: [00:05:59] Oh yes. I remember waking up in the morning and my mother you know you just see the backward and kind of in the shower and splashing water in the plant and singing these all songs that fellow human is obvious of these songs that you know kind of embody Mexico for us.

Axelrod: [00:06:15] Your book by the way *Midnight in Mexico A Reporter's Journey Through a Country's Descent into Darkness* is a memoir. And so we'll talk more about it but when you refer to your book that's that's what you're referring to. A great book by the way and I highly recommend it to folks who were who were listening. Did you resent your dad when you had to move to the states did you.

Corchado: [00:06:41] It's interesting. My father would say he wasn't a very affectionate man but I think one of the things he did when I was a young boy he sent us a postcard. It was the state capital of California and gave me that gave us a sense that our home would look like that everybody said oh the United States you're going to go. I mean you're going to find a home you're going to find toilets that flat flush flushing. So we were driving up on a bus a Greyhound bus from El Paso to California and we stopped at every time. And my brother would say. Are we there yet. I we met I'll take I take the car I said no it doesn't. No we're not there but I think we're close. We arrived. He was living in a trailer house with four other farm workers uncles of ours. We slept outside the trailer house by the melon fields and. I remember one everybody in my family members this tantrum died. I threw that I got up and I said OK gotcha. You know how terrible of you to have brought us here. But he said something that really struck me then he said. We're all going to work hard. We're all going to make it. And if you work hard life will get better. I didn't know what he meant at the time but I mean what choice do I have. I was six years old. So you take him at his word. I think for the longest time there was a sense of resentment that you took us from from Mexico and you promised my son something that just wasn't true. That's sort of the immigrant's mantra and core driving belief that.

Axelrod: [00:08:31] You come to America you work hard you can get ahead. It's lost I think in the debate today.

Corchado: [00:08:40] It is lost. I was a reporter for *The Dallas Morning News*. I mean I'm beginning to go to communities whether it's here in Chicago for example in San Diego and Dallas where employees are beginning to ask me why aren't the Mexicans coming anymore. There's a real sense of. What's going to happen next. And I I think that I mean the Mexicans are the boogeyman they're the punching bags these days. But I think that the day is coming soon where Americans will really miss Mexicans. I mean you can't really talk about one side or the other without the Mexicans. And I. Can tell you I mean it's. I don't I don't detect outrage on their part when that Whenever I interview immigrants about the current climate but

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there is a sense of. People being feeling betrayed being hurt people feeling like you continue this path you're. Basically sucking away the soul of this country. You know the whole sense that that this can be a better country. This will be one anecdote that always kind of resonates with me. And this was 1968 and we're still debating this. I've been living in the United States for three years. We're in California we're in the field. Bobby Kennedy had just been assassinated.

Axelrod: [00:10:18] And I just let me interject. Your mom was involved with the farm workers and Cesar Chavez. I was you know famously leading a movement for farm worker rights that Bobby Kennedy embraced as his own.

Corchado: [00:10:34] Right. My mother was very involved which is kind of controversial because I was in those days did not really walk on undocumented Mexicans felt that they were driving wages down. My mother was a green card holder and she would argue with the child people and say look we all care about human rights. We need to find a bridge. I mean it was interesting that my mother was a homemaker very quiet kind of meek at home. You come to the United States and suddenly she becomes you know raising hell left and right with the you know even lead strikes. And I would just want to say who is this woman. But when Bobby Kennedy died. We were out in the fields and they kept broadcasting his famous words you know some men see the way things are and ask why Others dream things that never we're and ask why not. And my mother. Kind of pulled us all together because they were they were translating the words into Spanish. And she said. It just kind of made the sign of. Listen and we listen to those words and she said. This is why we came here. This is why we make the sacrifice. And this is what you have to take away from this. And I mean that was the moment when you knew what the meaning of being an immigrant was or what you were here for you you that you had to dream and you had to believe in that and ask Why yes why not.

Axelrod: [00:12:10] It's interesting that you say Chavez was resistant to undocumented workers because he felt that they were driving wages down. I mean that's part of the debate that the fear of that in this economic environment whether it's true or not is what drives it in a sense that among people who are hostile that laws were broken and laws you know people should be compliant with laws. Why should some people. Be complying with laws and others not. It's it's. And of course every. Immigration reform that's been proposed has has required would it would require undocumented workers to pay back taxes pay penalties pay a penalty for breaking the law but it's a really emotional. Visceral kind of issue and of course Donald Trump mined it to great advantage.

Corchado: [00:13:14] Right. And I mean you bring up the issue of undocumented workers and I guess illegal immigration in the mid 60s when there is there are reforms to the immigration law that was never really anything to stop the demand for workers. I mean I remember when when we think the debate that we're having today about illegal immigration that goes back to all those years ago when yes the Braserio program ended. And it was like it's all over now. But yet the demand for work has never stopped. I mean I talked about earlier half my town ended up moving to where we were because people had a need for them because the demand never really wane. And that that those numbers just kept growing and growing and growing to the point that the table talked about something like 11 million undocumented workers.

Axelrod: [00:14:12] Yeah yeah. Well I don't know. You've you've got an incredible story and I want to get back to it. But while we're on this I know you're working on a second book and you and as you mentioned you've been talking to people what is a pervasive feeling there. We know that there's been a decline in people coming from Mexico to the U.S.. What is the pervasive feeling. In the Mexican community in America right now. You said betrayal sense of betrayal.

Corchado: [00:14:47] I think immediately after the election normally I heard a lot of stories about people planning to go back. There was almost a sense of maybe Trump's. Scenario that there will be mass

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deportation or self-deportation would come true. I mean I went back to Mexico and saw a lot of people that were trying to hurry up to finish building those houses. I mean we in Mexico you call these houses houses of nostalgia. You know the immigrant worker who lives in the US and sends money to build the home. Some day he will return. And yet that someday never comes. So I think between I would say November January February there was a sense of people going back people who felt I'm not going to put my kids through this. You know my kid was a U.S. born citizen. I'm not going to take the risk of being deported and then leaving my kid behind. I think now there's there's a there's a change also where yes there is that very very strong sense of betrayal a sense that for the last 30 years or so. Economic integration I think people felt like we were changing. We know you're really becoming. True neighbors and in a sense that people are taking a second look and saying. Wait a minute this is really our country. You know we have children here who are who are citizens. We have property here. We have homes here. I don't think that that decision to leave will be that easy. And I think you know the people are still kind of waiting to see whether some of these promises will materialize some mass deportations the building of the wall etc. so that there is I think a pause if you will to more of a wait and see attitude.

Axelrod: [00:16:48] What about attitudes in Mexico toward the U.S..

Corchado: [00:16:55] That's a great question and that's something Mexico is kind of heading into that kind of. But they're headed into election presidential election in about a year. Mexico historically has been anti-U.S. nationalists country. I think that's one of the reasons why the ruling party was in power for 71 years. You know they were they were they knew when to whip that into into into a frenzy into action. What the. With NAFTA in 1994 I mean I think Mexicans dare to dream that they could be different. This could be a different relationship. You saw we've seen a lot less nationalism less anti-American. That's changing. You're beginning to see that in the presidential campaigns where people are beginning to talk about the anti US to try to you know gain some points etc.. But what's interesting is. That there is also a sense of. We. We want to wait and see if these mass deportations do take place. It was interesting to see places like in some of these places in Mexico that have large expatriate communities where the or I see Americans who have taken to the streets and said you know we are also anti Donald Trump. Don't don't take this out on us. It's that we're with you. And I think that has helped contain the nationalism. For now.

Axelrod: [00:18:50] There is you know there's been quite a bit of speculation that the left could actually win this election. Obrador who has run twice before and failed could actually win. Former mayor of Mexico City quite left anti-American. And that Trump could turbo charge that. How realistic is that scenario.

Corchado: [00:19:19] It's pretty realistic. I think it's his. His race to lose at this point although it's also interesting how he has changed his rhetoric to some degree. He is now much more of a can conciliatory to towards the business community has been trying to make himself a plausible. Exactly. Even to the point where he's not blatantly anti NAFTA something that he was in the past I would say yes. And after has to be fixed and we have to do certain things to try to to try to make it better for the working class. But he's right I mean he lost twice. There's a lot of attention at state elections ever happened in a in a couple of weeks. I think if his party wins he is definitely the guy who people will be watching. But we're still a year away. And the other candidate one of them is the former President Calderon's wife who is also a strong candidate and she's more of the conservative base. But I think a lot will have a lot will depend on what happens in the next few months with the wall. The NAFTA negotiations and again this whole mass deportation.

Axelrod: [00:20:43] The current President Pena Nieto is is deeply unpopular by any standards and that unpopularity. Was was there before Donald Trump visited but? That visit during the campaign which got a lot of attention here was disastrous for him as president was reflected in the poll numbers.

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Corchado: [00:21:10] I mean he at one point he went down to 12 percent. I think the numbers in the last couple of days his disapproval rating is something close to 80 percent. The country. He had an opportunity. I mean I think at the time when he invited Donald Trump to Mexico the feeling was he has really taken a risk but maybe he's going to take Trump to LA Spinoza's the presidential palace and just skool that must say something to defend the rights of Mexicans in front of you know a world a world audience. None of that happened. It became a Twitter war where he had the letter said yes I did tell him that in private.

Axelrod: [00:21:56] They stood side by side and he didn't take that opportunity to publicly upbraid Trump which from a political standpoint was almost required for him. Why didn't he do that. People say that he was he was intimidated by Trump.

Corchado: [00:22:14] That that somehow Trump and he got to those pillows. He just as many Mexican columns will say he went out he didn't do his job and it was incredibly embarrassing for the population not just the Mexicans there but also Mexicans in the United States. And you start seeing his numbers just Depor. They did go up a little more after he said no the White House and visit the White House in January.

Axelrod: [00:22:45] We're going to take a short break and we'll be back with Alfredo Corchado.

Axelrod: [00:22:52] Let's let's return to your story. You wrote about a visit from a PBS crew when you were a kid to the San Joaquin Valley to chart the experience of farm workers there and how important that was to you and to others to see that there were people who cared about what was going on. I was wondering when I read that whether that was one of the things that planted somewhere in your head the idea that being a journalist had real power and meaning.

Corchado: [00:23:35] Definitely I mean that that really did change my life in many ways. At that time California had a rule that you had to be 15 to be out in the fields and I was 13. My mother would. Put on the big hat and large clothes to try and make me look older because she knew the money that she needed the money. And it was also summertime and that's how we bought our supplies for the school and our new clothes for for the fall. We worked the summers with my parents but again because my mother was a member of the SAS Chavez they were always very careful not to not to break any of those rules at the time. But I'm out in the fields. These guys are reporters looking for a story on the conditions of farm workers. What's it like being a kid at work in the fields. What's it like not having a toilet not having clean drinking water not having a break to eat. Cetera. And. I think reporters are smart. You know at least their perception and they looked at me and said This kid is not 15 and they came up to me and started asking me questions. I think one of the first questions asked me was you know you're not you're not 15 or you and I said no I'm 13 and my mother was working beside me. They did the interview. They left. And my mother was just horrified. Even though we had green cards she thought. You lied. We lied. We're going to we're going to get deported. That's what I was going to get so mad that he's going to run this out of the Union. But for me it was this incredible experience that someone actually cared enough to ask me what I thought about this or that. I mean someone wanted to give me a voice and that that's something I carry on. I dropped out in high school and my dream at the time was to go back to the fields. Me I'm most of the Mexican-American kids were dropping out of school or graduating they were not going to Berkeley they weren't going to UCLA Stanford. They were ending up back in the fields and I thought well what's the point. Why don't I just stay in the field and by the time they they they drop out I will be their supervisor. I will be the rancher or something or the labor contract or something. But my mother. Persisted and persisted I'm the oldest of nine and felt that I needed to set the example for the rest of my siblings. Finally bribe me with the car and said You know I told him I was seven and that's dirty pool car. We're said in Fresno California and I tell my mom I said I'm not going back to school. And I says why not see that car over there in front of a car and I said that's my dream. I want that car and right away she thought. Here's

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the deal. You promised me three things. A You will leave California because most of Mexican-Americans we saw in the Central Valley in San Joaquin Valley were working in the fields moved to El Paso where we saw some Mexican Americans wearing ties and she thought that you know we needed role models. We promised to get an education and see. Promise me you won't get married until you get an education. And you'll get that car. Well we'll give you the down payment we'll give you the first few payments and then you're on your own for a week. I went back and you rolled over. [crosstalk] It was a very painful decision but it was love a car lover car. I was in the rancher's daughter at the time and I kept thinking of her car and I picked the car ended up in an El Paso went to community college.

Axelrod: [00:27:32] You didn't go to the rancher's daughter and say if I get that car would you come to El Paso.

Corchado: [00:27:36] I did. I actually did. And I said my mother is doing this for for us. She believes I need an education. I mean she should come with me I'll pass or I come back to California with a degree. She didn't buy that. No. So I went over so I went to El Paso and I went to El Paso community college to try to get my GED and try to get my foot in the door and one of the first things that the council asked me was you know what do you what do you want to do. And what that means is what your study plan had no idea and I said I think I want to be a hairdresser. And he looked at me he said that's all you got is your parents made this big sacrifice for you. And I said Have you seen the movie Shampoo Warren Beatty et cetera and he said why don't we do an aptitude test and maybe maybe we'll find out something more about you. And he came back and said you know you're curious about the world you're curious about Evanthia curious about this that maybe you should think about being a diplomat or maybe a foreign correspondent. And I said What is that he says they will base you anywhere in the world. And I say including Mexico. He goes yes. And that just kind of came together. Well that's that's incredible because you know.

Axelrod: [00:29:04] To think that a counselor at the El Paso community college changed your life in that way really speaks to the power of education and the importance of the people who spend their lives in education. So you so that's the course you took.

Corchado: [00:29:23] Of course I took I ended up working at the El Paso I mean the college newspaper student newspaper. More to get credit. But also you had this big movement on the Mexican side of the border. I mean I'm living in El Paso and Juarez has become a laboratory for change for political change. So you can imagine yourself as a reporter covering studen issues and then in the afternoon evenings you're covering these massive demonstrations. And I always tell people I mean. That's when you were lured in by by journalism and you become addicted to journalism and you realize many years later that there's no cure for it. That's really how it all began.

Axelrod: [00:30:10] And professionally. How did your career evolve?

Corchado: [00:30:14] I had a first internship at the Pessah El Paso post an afternoon paper that doesn't exist anymore. I did a small internship at the Ogden center examiner in Ogden Utah. But the real break really began with a man named Frank Allen Frank. Allen was the bureau chief of The Wall Street Journal in Philadelphia and he I met him at a at a National Association of Hispanic Journalists Convention. This is back in the late 80s and I think newspapers were feeling that they had to become much more diverse and Frank really believed in that and diversity. And he would go to all these conventions he would scout people and so forth and he looked at me. I mean it was you know jeans and bold shoes and carry my family's photo albums with all my clips in the middle and he came out and talked to me and he said I don't think you're ready yet for the Wall Street Journal. But I like to keep in touch with you and I like to see your clips and so forth but the message from Frank was very simple. America is changing and we need people. Like you to tell these stories. And there was a real conflict inside of me because it's like do I become a cobra. Or do you really like me for my promise. So I ended up going to Philadelphia two years

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later were working in the bureau and covering the Black and Decker covering Campbell's soup. Nothing had to do with Mexico but it was very important that I think Frank took me through really the beginnings and taught me the fundamentals of being a journalist.

Axelrod: [00:32:04] You know it's I mean I speak now as a former journalist but it's one of these things where you can go to journalism school but it's really something you learn by doing. And the people who often teach you or your editors your colleagues. And so that's that's important to have those kind of formative experiences.

Corchado: [00:32:28] Those years I think you look back and you realize that was the key you know because it also I think it took me away from the border it took me away from Mexico and to live in a place like Philadelphia. I formed lifelong friendships but also it really taught you how to do you really want to do this and this what you want to do. And you ended up going to work at the Dallas Morning News left Philadelphia ended up going to Dallas the Dallas bureau of The Wall Street Journal. But again my dream was to. Go to Mexico and the Dallas Morning News in 1994 ended up becoming their correspondent one of this was I think an exciting time of journalism I mean we had we up having the largest Bureau of any American newspaper there had 12 people including a TV crew. We were covering all angles of Mexico we had bureaus in Monterrey we had bureaus in Colombia even Havana. We were the other than the Chicago Tribune there was a Dallas mine was in the Chicago Tribune with bureaus in Havana. I mean these were the great days of journalism and I was covering that was more involved as covering immigration issues a democratic process in Mexico and U.S. policy to Latin America. Those are the those were the things I was doing at the time.

Axelrod: [00:33:50] How how how there. What is the complement of American journalists in in Mexico now as compared to then.

Corchado: [00:34:02] It's a totally different world. I mean we're looking at. Dallas Morning News went from a tall person staff to zero today I'm planning to go back to summer and cover Mexico and cover the border. But it's really the only the major papers that have small bureaus The Washington Post The New York Times The Wall Street Journal The L.A. Times. I mean back in the day I think there were four or five major Texas papers papers from Arizona as the Southwest. And that has really I think impacted the way Americans understand Mexico today or do not understand Mexico today. I mean it's just not that much news that reaches them.

Axelrod: [00:34:55] You your book is The subtitle is A Reporter's Journey Through a Country's Descent into Darkness. Talk about that and what you mean by that.

Corchado: [00:35:08] I think at one point every reporter in the oil we corresponded and actually it became a crime reporter because of the drug war. And I went there what I promised my parents when I left they were very much against me going back to Mexico. They thought you know we made so much sacrifice. We don't want you to go back. And they knew that was the term. But they said you know Promise me promise us that you will never cover drug traffickers. Because they don't understand the word forgiveness. My parents had a small little restaurant in an Saulteaux PP-ASEL street two three blocks from the border one of our favorite clients. We later learned was a member of the drug traffickers who was trying to launder money through our restaurant by offering to give us dirty maybe \$100000 to build other small little restaurants and we thought you know we're coming from California. We didn't really understand the dynamic.

Axelrod: [00:36:12] We should point out your family ultimately moved to El Paso with you.

Corchado: [00:36:16] Right. We had we moved from California to El Paso. But when we found out that

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this man had. Knew the are our schedules as does my siblings and said look if anyone ever finds out you know they will pay the price and we thought OK we got to get out here. So my father blocked the deal said not to the deal but he learned that he said you know they don't understand the word forgiveness do not cover these stories. And again we had a lot that's meaning it's danger meaning that it's very dangerous and meaning it also felt that yes I may be American because I was now an American citizen but I'm still very much a Mexican. I wouldn't have the same protection that an American journalist would have. It didn't really faze me because I thought I'm not interested in the stories I'm more interested in. And again you know democracy and immigration etc.. But at some point I think what with the decline of our staffs the decreasing staff and then Mexico I think when Mexico became a the first opposition in government comes in in the year 2000 a very centralized system becomes decentralized. The power leaves Mexico City and suddenly the power is gone to all the states and the narcos who. There is a lot of complicity there's corruption within within the agencies within the government itself. They become while boys I mean things really get out of hand. And as a reporter you become a crime reporter. And so. It was my job all of a sudden to shift my focus from other issues from the beast into Fox. George W. Bush relationship immigration to solely looking at why Mexico was really falling apart and you began to follow you know people talk about follow the money. I mean we were basically following a trail of bodies throughout the country and how certain groups had become so emboldened that they were showing videos of beheadings and so forth. And really what that meant for a young country with a fledgling democracy. And that's why the title you know you you you you fall into the darkness of a country and what does it mean for the country and describe how pervasive these cartels are and their influence over government and law enforcement in Mexico. I you know I look back and I think. Part of the problem. That I had was I was so naive about about how these cartels work how they function. Again I hadn't really paid much attention but soon enough you're learning that. In communities in very key communities especially along the U.S.-Mexico border. The mayor's office is infiltrated by cartels. The local police department the state police the journalism office or newsrooms are infiltrated just about every key organization is infiltrated by cartels the state police takes. They work for one Bibo cartel the local police works for the other cartel. And so you have this matters.

Axelrod: [00:39:56] And they're infiltrated. By money, fear.

Corchado: [00:39:59] By money and fear. And that used to be more money. But I think what happened in the 2000s then the current phase they were living in is really fear. It's used to be you know the bullet or the Brive now days. They don't even make that kind of offer. It's it's the bullet. There was a cartel or a paramilitary group that I think changed the whole dynamics in Mexico. A group called the set as some members were trained by U.S. special forces to take on the cartels. They go back. The cartels basically bring them in with money and say you know if you're out to get us but we're going to pay you money to work for us. Thirty five members deserted the Mexican military and ended up becoming their own separate cartel but they set a whole new standard in Mexico through fear through the killing mass number of people through hanging people on you know from bridges public bridges beheading them taking sending sending to newspapers sending to officers you know the heads of arrivals and so forth and saying You're next. And obviously. Something like 180000 people were killed during during this period. And journalists were also on the firing line.

Axelrod: [00:41:30] We'll take a short break and we'll be right back. Alfredo you mentioned. The. The killing of journalist and violence generally healthy people broadly recognize that Mexico. You know you get outside of Afghanistan and Iraq. Mexico's the most dangerous place for. Journalists. And among the most violent places around. How do you function in an environment like that. And what's your own level of fear. You function very very.

Corchado: [00:42:16] Very carefully. It's important you bring up Afghanistan and Syria and other Somalia because there is no real declare conflict in Mexico. And I think in many ways that makes it even that

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much more dangerous because you don't really know. Who to trust or where the bullet may be coming from. It's a situation where you don't know who to trust. You know you don't know who to talk to. I have to make it clear that is that yes I was born into Rongo Yes I'm Mexican. Yes people may see me and there was an expression in Mexico you know you may see that cactus on my forehead. And that gives me away as a as a short Mexican. But as I report in some of these communities I'm always careful. To make sure that my passport is sticking out the U.S. passport that the credentials are hanging over me that congressional the State Department my own newspaper. Make it clear to people that I'm an American citizen. When I come into a community I make it a point to go see them the mayor to make see the police chief and say I'm here for the Dallas Morning News and I am doing this. I'm doing that. Get the message out because you think because there is a reluctance to kill Americans. That's what I believe. That's what I believe. I mean there are people. Friends of mine colleagues of mine who may disagree with me. But I believe that. That cartels are afraid of the consequences. I mean we're talking about a 30 40 billion dollar industry. You bring too much noise. You bring the attention of the U.S. government. It's not good for business. Having said that I think the cartels in recent years have changed dramatically where when I when I started covering them there were maybe four or five major cartels in Mexico. These days are more than a hundred criminal groups. And I say that because I don't know that those that the younger generation understands the consequences. I don't know that they're thinking as their elders were at one point.

Axelrod: [00:44:32] This is such an interesting point because you know I'm thinking about there's a big gang problem in parts of Chicago and part of what people attribute that to is that some of the older gang leaders have been tried and put in prison and now you've got younger less sophisticated gang leaders who are who make who are more imprudent than the older guys who thought of themselves as running businesses whereas these these kids are more apt to be trigger happy and employ employ violence as a tool. So it's a similar kind of so many parallels. Yeah yeah. What what is American policy. I'm going to return at the end to this issue of being a journalist in that kind of environment. What about American policies you say they don't want to bring the wrath of America down on them these cartels. And it suggests that America isn't doing enough to fight these cartels. Is that your judgment.

Corchado: [00:45:47] I think we've seen the face we're doing the George W. Bush period. You had the media initiative which is much more of a policy that was much more oriented towards helping Mexico through the military military help. I think the last few years of the Obama administration still under the Merida Initiative the focus was much more on building society building communities building civil societies. And that was something that we began to see a difference in some communities where people started really learn how to hold the government accountable not in the American way. I mean I think it's still a democracy very much in diapers. But you began to see a real change. And I think that's long term that's Mexico's best hope is that is that communities really learn to become a civil society community that you know learning to live judicial reform trust trusting police are working with police that sense today. And I talked to people who are close to the cartels. They don't think America really cares that much anymore. They they don't. On a society level they say that the question is what will the Trump administration do. Well he continued supporting these communities or is it all. Is it over on the cartels size. We can do is we can do that. I don't I don't know that be any kind of payback on that on the part of the US.

Axelrod: [00:47:18] There's no argument that you can attack this problem from the supply side just to difficult that perhaps the way to attack it is from the demand side and that goes to the issue of legalization. You know the U.S. is the main recipient of all of these drugs. I think Chicago was El Chapo was number one market. And. The question is if if there were some sort of legalization of it at some level of drugs you know with money diverted to treatment here. Would that have an impact on the cartels in Mexico.

Corchado: [00:48:02] There was a term that we heard a lot about during the Obama administration which

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is co-responsibility I mean Mexico cannot do this alone. There has to be the demand side has to be addressed. On the Mexican side I think if there is one thing that gives me hope is a sense that. People are also kind of looking taking a deep look at themselves in the mirror. Mexicans are saying wait a minute there's so much corruption within our government and we're part of the problem. But until the United States deals with demand. It doesn't matter what we do. It's such a powerful force and yet you know there's kind of a funny story. Colorado started legalizing legalized watching too and I think some other states yes marijuana marijuana and you begin to see more of the high end Mexicans who are. Buying stuff from the U.S.. Because they think the U.S. stuff is there's much more quality and this is a real affront to some of the Mexican cartels who are also committed to trying to upgrade their quality. So I mean the impact goes both ways.

Axelrod: [00:49:13] Doesn't that make you proud as an American. We always produce great stuff here except tacos. So. So on this issue of legalization do you do you do you think that would be a blow to the cartels. I mean I'm not I'm I have mixed feelings about the issue but I'm I'm just wondering about what impact you think it might have.

Corchado: [00:49:39] I talked to one cartel person a while back and I said What happens if the Americans decide tomorrow to legalize everything. And he said you know we'll probably go on vacation. Or probably go to the beach and enjoy some of our billions for a little while. But I wouldn't put it past them that at some point they're going to say you know what guy it doesn't matter he has made he has cookies. Very popular in Mexico. Are are contributing to American obesity. And we're going to ban them. Just once they do that. We're back at work. Anything that's banned in the U.S. anything that becomes illegal is business for us because we operate it in a system where the institution is so weak we can basically push things around however we want. So again it's going back to this sense of responsibility.

Axelrod: [00:50:33] What do you. You mentioned NAFTA earlier just shifting for a second. President Trump has indicated that he wants to reopen negotiations apparently they are going to be reopened. How do you how do you evaluate the impact of that potentially on on Mexico and on relations between the two countries. And what do you think's going to come of this negotiation.

Corchado: [00:51:02] Well I think the first thing to understand is that Napster was not the panacea that Americans think it was. I mean the Americans in Ohio Americans in Michigan Pennsylvania who think we were ripped off. I mean Mexicans today are still earning five six seven dollars a day. They're not. If anyone think the guys in Ohio and Michigan and so on would acknowledge that. But their point is that they were working for middle class wages and now Mexicans are you know working for less. [crosstalk] But that's why the factories went there and both sides are getting screwed. Right. But I think it's important to look at the negotiations. I mean what I'm looking at as a reporter is is I think they start in August or late late Funtime and tenderness here that will determine. Who the candidate becomes for the PRI for is bailing out a successor that I think will determine as to who becomes the next president of Mexico. People will be looking at that very closely.

Axelrod: [00:52:09] So if there's a perception that Mexico got the short end of the stick in these negotiations it may radicalize the electorate more.

Corchado: [00:52:17] You will see a those numbers just climb and making it very possible that this may be his election as maybe he has his victory.

Axelrod: [00:52:28] I want to return to the dangers of reporting from from Mexico. You just lost a very prominent journalist there. He is among one of many who have lost their lives. Talk about him Javier Valdez Cardenas Cardenas. This. Is a staggering.

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Corchado: [00:52:53] We've lost 106 or 107 it's it's hard to keep up with the numbers because that was another one has gone missing this week presumed dead. So numbers may climb up to 107. This is 107 people killed. Since the year 2000. And these are the conservative figures that are provided by the Committee to Protect Journalists other other agencies have numbers my time. Have you got a nice. Was I think a turning point for many Mexican journalists who believed that if you were prominent enough if if you were. An award winning journalist recognized from both sides of the border that gave you a sense of protection. I remember back in 2010 or so Committee to Protect Journalists was very they're very committed to try to find good journalists in Mexico to try to bestow recognition protect them and so forth. And at time any correspondence I felt that. CPA recognizing Javier. Was incredibly important and we're hoping that this would become the start of a new trend to identify key reporters get into the Niemen fellowship at Harvard or other other places in the United States.

Axelrod: [00:54:18] And you you you're one of the people you got and even I got to even fellowship in 2009. And since then I mean I been helpful in trying to get to other people at the foundation. But talking to my colleagues last week I mean that sense of. Protection is gone.

Corchado: [00:54:43] And again there's no real public outcry there's no public outcry. And in Mexico among the citizens among residents there is no real outcry in the United States. And I would say these are our neighbors. And if people really do care about a democratic Mexico you can't have a democracy without a a press trying to hold you accountable.

Axelrod: [00:55:08] Well it's this would be unthinkable in the U.S. we take for granted. The freedom of the press even as we struggle at times over it it is fundamental to a democracy. Even if office holders don't always appreciate it to have a free press but what about what about you you're about to return. Do you do so with heightened. Fear for yourself.

Corchado: [00:55:43] I woke up on the 9th and I thought I'm I'm going back and going back to journalism. I hadn't really felt that sense of fear until. Haveour was killed. I think that shattered my own myth that if you have protection. There is. Maybe they'll leave you alone. I still have my place in Mexico City. I still plan to report out of Mexico City and some reporting or much of my reporting also from the U.S. Mexico border. But I would be lying to you if I did if I told you I don't I don't think about that. And that there's not a part of me that that is. Feels a sense of trepidation that. A lot of these memories have come back to that that same debate is back. Is this worth it to go back to what do I even try to tell the story. And why are you going. I believe in journalism I mean I really. I believe in girls and but I also believe in my home country. And I think. Especially the last year. Being away from Mexico you see I see my homeland from a different lens and. Sometimes. I'm someone who belongs to two countries. I mean I have to homeland's some that I feel that that's really why I like the border because you really don't have to choose anymore. You're there. But sometimes when I go to Mexico I even feel there's a there's a more hopeful feeling in spite of all the troubles that that we've talked about. There's a sense of hope that sometimes I feel like we're losing in this country and. I want to be able to tell the stories. I don't know that. I would take the same chances. I took. But I think there's so many other stories that I can also report on. You know I I note that.

Axelrod: [00:58:08] You never did you ask the rancher's daughter to come to El Paso with you. You never did actually settle down you never got married never had a family is part of it because of the life you live. I mean is part of that. Well I've been lucky that. I've had a long.

Corchado: [00:58:26] Time companion who's also a journalist and like me also born in Mexico City and from the United States. But I think when we talk about it we always talk about. Trying to reconnect. With the homeland and maybe by doing that. We also try to reconnect your readers your viewers to both sides. Obviously I think we've done a lousy job because of the way Mexico is portrayed these days. But I think all it does that it makes me want to go back and tell these stories and maybe listen a little closer.

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Axelrod: [00:59:08] Well Alfredo Corchado we are so grateful for you to. Be with us at the Institute of Politics to be with us today. And I just want to honor your courage in taking the risks you're taking to tell those stories and in honoring you. I want to honor every journalist all over the planet. And in Mexico who take risks every day to tell these stories. We owe you a great debt of gratitude and we wish you all the best.

[00:59:41] Thank you David and on behalf of many of my colleagues in Mexico. Thank you for your solidarity.