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The Axe Files - Ep. 161: George Stephanopoulos

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Axelrod: [00:00:00] GEORGE STEPHANOPOULOS Good to see you.

Stephanopoulos: [00:00:02] Welcome to my house. Thank you. It makes it easier for me you came to me it's great.

Axelrod: [00:00:08] That's how we roll. I wanted you know I I thought one of the most vivid exchanges that you had on your on your Sunday show was with Reverend Dobson of the focus that was a focus on the family to.

Stephanopoulos: [00:00:29] Remind me.

Axelrod: [00:00:30] Well you questioned him on the morality of a position he was taking and he said you're going to lecture me on morality and there was a hint of you being sort of a-religious and it's the reason it struck me so is because I know you and I know your history and you grew up in a very faith driven household.

Stephanopoulos: [00:00:57] For sure son grandson nephew God son of a Greek Orthodox priest. Yeah. I mean it had been I used to joke my family business until I sort of broke up broke the string went bad and went into politics. But yeah my grandfather on my father's side came here I guess in 19 36 and was basically the Greek Orthodox priest for the entire West. He went straight out to Great Falls Montana and covered that whole territory. There was a time when Greeks were said to Greece that there had been but two or three waves of immigration but that was one of them obviously right before World War II. They that the family gradually made its way east. And my dad was born in Greece but he grew up in both Ohio and Pennsylvania. My grandfather had parishes there and in fact my dad ended up serving for 20. I mean several years eight years in a Cleveland Parish which is right adjacent to the one where my grandfather had served.

Axelrod: [00:01:58] And so this was a presence a pervasive thing in your mind and how and how how did that impact on you.

Stephanopoulos: [00:02:08] It was what I knew. I mean and so I always felt like I was living in because I'm sort of a first and a half generation Greek might as I said my dad was born in Greece My mom was born here but she was also the daughter of immigrants who had come here. Her father came here around 1918 worked on the worked on the railroads worked his way out west all the way to Utah made it back to East to Minnesota settle in Rochester Minnesota and opened up a shoe repair shop on Main Street in Rochester. So my parents were really hardcore first generation Greeks were really brought up and that is your Greek-American. I was kind of American Greek but still living in that world where you know sort of the whole rhythms of my life were set. To the church our calendar was set to the church that was our our community. Yet I would also you know sort of go out into the world public school and you're exposed to something else so I really felt like I had my foot in two very different worlds when I was growing up.

Axelrod: [00:03:21] Did you ever consider going into the priesthood?

Stephanopoulos: [00:03:23] Yeah I mean I thought that's what I assumed I would be I guess up until around I was I guess 14 when I to sort of hit me that I wasn't going to be a priest I wouldn't didn't say anything about it for a few years because I I kind of felt... betrayal's a slightly too strong a word but it had been the expectation. I had grown up with whether it was put on me or not just what I assumed. And then

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when I realized that that wasn't the path I was going to follow I felt I guess almost embarrassed or abashed about coming out and talking about it now turned out my parents were great about it it was something much more that I was feeling and something that was being imposed on me. But yeah that's what I assumed I was going to do.

Axelrod: [00:04:05] Now there are some who would say that you've made the journey from the Sacred to the profane.

Stephanopoulos: [00:04:10] Went as bad as I could go, right?

Axelrod: [00:04:12] So. So how did your interest in politics grow?.

Stephanopoulos: [00:04:15] Well that was something also I think we grew up with not so much partisan politics but you know I grew up in a house where my parents read the newspapers and watched the news on television and talked about what was going on and that was something that was always part of our lives. I didn't get a full spark. I wasn't like the kind of kid in grade school or high school like I have friends that see I was 12 in the summer of the Watergate hearings. I had know that wasn't a big part of my life at 12 I a lot of friends my age that they were really into it then for me at that stage in my life I was you know caddying and hanging out with my friends and you know going to the pool in the summer pretty well and but it sort of hit me much more I would say in college I had some great professors and I actually remember my first political job I was a freshman in Columbia and I put out signs of the subway for Carter Byrd and I think it was running for Congress at the time was on the city council is running for Congress at the time and I got much more involved over the course of college and then for me the real turning point was my junior year of college. I'd been taking more political science classes I'd been carrying about a lot more. And I had an internship with local congresswoman. They called it the LBJ internship at that time I think was \$500 a month for June in the summer and that was the summer of nineteen eighty one. The Reagan tax cuts were. Going through the Congress and she Mary Rose Okoro was a member of Congress. Oh yes. Global and local in Cleveland. She was you know standing on the frontlines fighting Social Security cuts. And I think I wrote my first statement for the congressional record and I was hooked for life.

Axelrod: [00:06:17] And do you did was there any connection between you know faith and sort of the tenets of faith.

Stephanopoulos: [00:06:28] The idea that you have responsibility for the world beyond yourself. And you know the for me you know the basic idea that. We have to love one another as we love ourselves and that you carry that simple idea through I think to public policy in some level putting other people even not fully before yourself but certainly on an equal. On an equal plane. And I think you can sort of derive principles of a lot of public policy now you're always going to disagree on the details of how to achieve that. But the basic driving the basic driving philosophy for me political philosophy for me comes from that.

Axelrod: [00:07:14] How'd your folks take it when you veered into the political direction.

Stephanopoulos: [00:07:18] I think they were they were of two minds at first. They. I think my parents have actually gotten more liberal more democratic over time. But if it wasn't about the partisanship it was like. A lot of first generation families. The idea is that again if I was going to be a priest I'd.

Axelrod: [00:07:43] Be a lawyer.

Stephanopoulos: [00:07:44] You got it. Well Doc I was I was never going to be a doctor so that wasn't going to happen that you had to. You had to sort of have that profession credential and that was the next

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period of my life where I spent a few years kind of not dissembling but not talking too much about what exactly I wanted to do. The first internship junior year then again to be senior year college and I didn't know exactly what I wanted to do. I went to pass again then I applied to the peace corps but also applied for some internships again in Washington and kind of at the last minute got one of the Carnegie Endowment and I ended up taking then I said to my parents I had already taken the SATs let me just do this for a year and then that was an election year 1982. Another member of Congress from Cleveland got elected. I Ed Feighan.

Axelrod: [00:08:36] Yes. You might remember. Yes. Yeah I remember him not just from his service in Congress but running this titanic race with Dennis Kucinich

[00:08:45] [crosstalk]

Stephanopoulos: [00:08:51] That was a big deal at the time that these two two young men under 30 Did you work in that race. No. I mean that would have been 19 what 77 I was 16 again. No that was before I had a real political awaking but I remembered it. Yeah. And yet he lost to Dennis Kucinich but then ended up in Congress and it was the same thing. My internship was running out in December. I could have gone on to law school I guess in that September but it didn't wasn't quite ready yet still hadn't scratched the edge completely. And I met him and I have you completely ruled that out law school. Yes. You know the truth every day this is getting us off at another tangent one of the things I like best about you know the career I've been lucky enough to have both working in Congress working in campaigns working in the White House and then at ABC I've I've gotten to deal with the best parts of the law and with the drudgery. I mean all the all the big constitutional big public policy issues we study them all the time and we talk about them all the time and I've learned a lot about them without. Without becoming a lawyer.

Axelrod: [00:10:03] So you stay with Feighan for a few years right?

Stephanopoulos: [00:10:06] I worked for him. Let's see that was 80. He started in 83. Yeah. And then in the fall of 83 I kept wanting to put it off again. So I told my parents let me take one more shot because it would buy me another year. I'll play for the Rhodes scholarship I applied in college and didn't get it. And you know this was a thing where so much that hinges on your interviews and working for two years and made a big difference. And right when that job was about to end I got the road so I went to England for a couple of years and that pretty much put law school to bed.

Axelrod: [00:10:47] Nice credentials for your folks too right.

Stephanopoulos: [00:10:51] Because that's what happened and then then after that one thing led to another.

Axelrod: [00:10:55] Yeah well one thing it led to was you working for Mike Dukakis when he ran for president. How did that come. Obviously there was an attraction there.

Stephanopoulos: [00:11:05] Short Greek guy with no sense of humor, that's my old joke. He's got a pretty good one. It was a haphazard thing. I had a great experience at Oxford where actually when I came back it was the first time I had tried to go go full time to television journalism because when I was at Oxford I had taken the you know you go there and it's a great schedule. You go to school for eight weeks and then you're off for six three times a year most. And in my first two long breaks at the time there was a famine in Sudan and I took my first break and volunteered with the International Rescue Committee and Save the Children was doing some work there but also did my first journalism. I was a stringer for the Christian Science Monitor I wrote two articles on the famine. And it's such a mind bogglingly different world. I would handwrite the articles and I think I called them in to like some 1 800 number from a phone booth in

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Khartoum and you know any guide I remember that was that thrill that you lived with early in your career. Well the first time you see your byline on something that you really cared about and you felt like you're telling the world.

Axelrod: [00:12:28] I also felt when I was a reporter that actually calling stories in was an exhilarating thing. Sometimes on deadline you know just the the rush to tell the story quickly tell it correctly was...

Stephanopoulos: [00:12:44] And at that time I actually then got hooked up with at the time a small there was a small CBS documentary running on Sunday mornings. And I had met another former student at Oxford when I came back and told him my trip. And we ended up going back on my next break. And we filmed these two shows and it turned out that we were there at that time while we were there filming these documentaries on the famine. There was a coup. And so I ended up doing more journalism for that for the Christian Science Monitor then. And so I thought I came out of it thinking maybe I want to do this you know and I still ended up teasing both Rick Kaplan and Ted Koppel about this for many years afterwards. One of the places I applied when I came back from Oxford was Nightline and I got a very I got a reply. It was one sentence basically saying we have no use for you. So I went back to Ed Feighan and it was his chief of staff for about a year and a half. And but I did want to get involved in a campaign. And the attraction to Mike Dukakis was was you know very strong Greek-American first Greek-American at a real shot and Agnew kind of didn't count. And you probably know him. I'm sure you know Nick Metropolis sure was. Was my connection to that campaign. And I ended up doing a bunch of jobs at the beginning and went up to Concord during the New Hampshire primary and then was full time as a communications director for the Ohio primary where Jesse Jackson was still a factor then and then I went to Boston and in June when know everybody was just measuring their office for their drapes for the office.

Axelrod: [00:14:33] Well famously Dukakis was 17 points ahead.

Stephanopoulos: [00:14:37] At the convention. But I again this is how much the world has changed. I was part of the rapid response unit ... [crosstalk]

Stephanopoulos: [00:14:54] We were so pathetic and you know again the all time our the way we would get the news was literally an all time AP ticker in the corner of the office the first days ever research was sort of LexisNexis kind of like myself feel so all but the club that that August we got decimated and you could feel it happening. But you know coming off the high of the convention. But you know Dukakis had this thing where he was a little old fashioned and he does you know to his credit and his detriment. He believed that he's a hyper rational man now hyper principled person who believes that that's sort of the way everybody else is or should be right. And he couldn't believe that the attacks that they started to launch starting with even sending Ronald Reagan out to kind of kick off the idea that he was quote invalid and setting up rumors about his mental health problems but then going on to the Boston Harbor and the Willie Horton. Right. And you know the defense stuff was just by the end of August we were in so much trouble.

Axelrod: [00:16:05] We should know it was Roger Ailes who was the mastermind behind that campaign and to this day I think it probably was the most effective negative campaign in a presidential race.

Stephanopoulos: [00:16:19] Six weeks completely turned everything around I mean by that that people still talk about the. And you know now I know better. I mean I think I felt like we were still in it in October when I look back and we weren't

Axelrod: [00:16:35] Although what happened in the debate the debate strengthened didn't a negative impression.

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Stephanopoulos: [00:16:39] Yeah sort of. And I think you could argue that Dukakis had a chance in the debates to come back.

Axelrod: [00:16:43] But you know what we should remind those who don't remember or know that he got a question on what he would do he as opposed to the death penalty. Got a question of what he would do if his wife had been raped and murdered would he support the death penalty for that person.

Stephanopoulos: [00:16:59] He just gave this very deadpan answer why he's opposed the definitely as opposed to any emotion on what it would feel like if someone killed his wife or hurt his wife.

Axelrod: [00:17:09] And it just so after this Willie Horton campaign it just reinforced the negative that was deadly. Did you know Dukakis did you get to know him during that campaign?

Stephanopoulos: [00:17:19] A little bit I didn't travel though and so I mean I would see him a lot and I admire him still. I mean it was actually.

Axelrod: [00:17:24] He was a fine governor.

Stephanopoulos: [00:17:26] Fine governor. I to this day I mean I still regret that during the Clinton administration. We didn't find a place for him in the cabin and I think he would have been excellent secretary of Health and Human Services transportation. But if anything he's and he's a he's dedicated his life to public policy and public service and he's just been tremendous that and he's been teaching ever since.

Axelrod: [00:17:52] Because Bill Clinton gave the nominating speech for which is famously. I think it's still you still talking now it went on for quite a while.

Stephanopoulos: [00:18:00] You look at that's one of the things you think about Bill Clinton. How many times has he been introduced. Dismissed. And then come back.

Axelrod: [00:18:10] Yeah in fact he was really innovative when he I think he went on the Tonight Show.

Stephanopoulos: [00:18:14] The Tonight show with Johnny Carson.

Axelrod: [00:18:17] And he and he made fun of himself.

Stephanopoulos: [00:18:20] Now that just becomes standard operating procedure.

Axelrod: [00:18:22] Yeah. Yeah. So talk about Bill Clinton. You. You went to work for Dick Gephardt. I actually was turned out to be Dukakis his principal opponent in that primary and in a in 88.

Stephanopoulos: [00:18:41] And yeah I actually that was one of the other points in my life where I thought I was leaving politics I actually first after the campaign. I really did the circuit. I first interviewed with both Al Gore and Joe Biden coming out to join their Senate offices. Neither one worked out but at the same time I had known father took the Healey was the president of Georgetown who is becoming the president New York Public Library and he was moving up here and he asked me to be his chief of staff executives. Doesn't that sound like a pretty interesting job opportunity. Well I did that. But again I wasn't done. And that spring I guess it was the spring of late spring of 1989. There was a wholesale replacement of the entire Democratic leadership Jim Wright Bill Gray both left and Dick Gephardt became the Democratic leader and through another great political operator fixer Kirk O'Donnell who had it in the Dukakis campaign he hooked me up with Gephardt too as he was majority leader for an interview on becoming his

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floor his chief floor staff which I've had all year. I'm so grateful that a lot of great jobs in my life in some ways that was one of my favorite job. Never talk about being right in the middle of the right in the middle of the action and there's it's it's it's politics on every single level. You have to know the personalities the personalities of every member of the Democratic Caucus and some Republicans as well and what moves them. You have to know the issues and you have to know the politics of it was just great great training and you're there on the floor every single day talking to members of Congress and being in the strategy meetings with the speaker on how you're going to approach the new White House and it was just it was an incredible education an incredible thrill and really fun.

Axelrod: [00:20:51] We're going to take a short break. We'll be right back with George Stephanopoulos. You arrived there not just after a period of time when there was a shakeup in the Democratic leadership but shortly there would be a shakeup in the Republican leadership. Newt Gingrich affected the essentially the purge of Bob Michael who is a moderate Republican I remember.

Stephanopoulos: [00:21:12] I remember what precipitated it all. I was in the middle of that as well that was at the time when one of the things that elected George H.W. Bush thanks to Roger Ailes was the promise of you read my lips no new taxes.

Axelrod: [00:21:24] Right.

Stephanopoulos: [00:21:26] By 1990 that promise was untenable. Because of the budget was so I mean I get a sense of how much things have changed. Untenable because it just seemed like the responsible thing to do at the time. I mean today I don't think the leaders would find untenable but at that time they did our he did. And. George Mitchell was the lead Democratic leader in the Senate. Tom Foley the speaker and Dick Gephardt were the leaders and they came up with the strategy that the Democrats would not negotiate until Bush explicitly said you know that promise is no longer viable. We're going to have to raise taxes. And you saw the beginnings of so much of what's happened politically. Today right in that in that event John Sununu was his chief of staff at the time was Bush's chief of staff and he knew how much trouble it was going to be. And even though they had another guy Dick Durbin who has their own director pushing them to get you you have to do the responsible thing and raise the taxes. SUNUNU didn't want to do it but they finally agreed because the Democrats wouldn't talk unless they did. And but the only way they would do was to put up a press release tack it up to the wall of the way and as if that was what they had done and it exploded.

Axelrod: [00:23:00] But that's pretty much how they make announcements at the White House today.

Stephanopoulos: [00:23:02] Exactly. But what happened was there was a budget summit at Andrews Air Force Base for something like 30 days and you knew. From and I still have this image I'm seeing it in my head right now of Newt Gingrich you know you had Sununu and Darman and for for the White House Newt was then I guess the number two or three you know in the House Republican leadership and you could tell in all those meetings he would be reading these sort of pulp crime novels through the meetings and have a big stack of books and papers and you just knew he was going to be against this thing.

Axelrod: [00:23:44] Well he got the idea to stick the knife in Bob Michaels back.

Stephanopoulos: [00:23:47] And that's what happened. They ran Bob Michel and the White House reached an agreement. And Newt Gingrich led a revolt voted down the first time.

Axelrod: [00:23:56] How much. Do you think the. You say a lot of what we're seeing today goes back to then I sort of you know give Gingrich credit for sort of launching this sort of polarity in our politics for really kind especially when it comes to lack of comity.

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Stephanopoulos: [00:24:14] You know it goes much further than that though it goes back to goes back to my first job with Ed Feighan. Ed when he first got elected was a part of a group of about 12 or 13 members of Congress who went to El Salvador in December I guess of 82 January of 83 even before they were sworn in. And it was in talking about that trip and those members that Newt started the practice of speaking to an empty chamber. Yes. And he did and he was basically attacking these members as being disloyal and you know un-American socialists and all that.

[00:24:56] [crosstalk]

Stephanopoulos: [00:24:59] But then this is before you know. People learn how to respond to it. You had the feeling that he was saying it to their face and they weren't responding. But it was really to an empty chamber now and what ended up happening was I guess it was O'Neill who then had to start the practice of turning the cameras around during these speeches so that you could see when it was an empty chamber and when it wasn't but it goes back it was a very beginning.

Axelrod: [00:25:32] Talk about your first encounter with Bill Clinton and how you.

Stephanopoulos: [00:25:38] That's forwarding a couple of years later '91 when I was hired by Dick Gephardt It was an amazing job but I think I was hired because he was planning on running for president. And then you know he's tried and building the beginnings of a campaign team. And you go back to that time though of 1991 coming out of the first Desert Storm George Bush was at 90-91 percent approval and you had this series of top Democrats from Dick Gephardt Al Gore and Bill Bradley.

Axelrod: [00:26:11] Cuomo

Stephanopoulos: [00:26:11] Well Cuomo held on a little first he was out and then he came back in who just all said no raise I mean everyone who was expected around decided to take a pass including Gephardt but I really you know was it that I felt like I was at another point in my life where I sort of had to make a choice even though I loved working in the house. I didn't think I wanted to do that my entire career and if I didn't go into something else I felt I would kind of become a life become a lifer. I mean I really did. After the Dukakis experience went to working at least one more presidential campaign. Gephardt said no. But through mutual friends Mark Guarani and Stan Greenberg I was introduced to it. CLINTON I actually met him in Greenberg's office in September of 1991. Interestingly I actually interviewed with both Bill Clinton and Bob Kerrey on the same day and I was attracted to both of them for very different reasons. I mean Bob Kerry as you know this war hero had kind of an existential Bobby Kennedy type politician taking a strong stand against flag burning the flag burning amendment. And I met with him at a great meeting with him and Billy Shore but. Didn't come away with a strong sense that he. Had thought through the whole campaign or knew how he was going to get from here to there. Completely different experience with with Clinton met him in Stan's office. He asked me what I did for Dukakis and I told him you know because of the jokes off me and rapid response and he laughed and but then really this is the interview was mostly him telling me how the primaries are going in and saying basically something that turned out to be very true he said we're going to know on the day of the Illinois primary. And I think that's it I'm going to wrap it up which turned out to be true and I was just dazzled by how much he knew about. Everything having to do with running for president he knew why he was running. He knew the policies that would that would fuel his vision and he knew the politics.

Axelrod: [00:28:34] He'd been the chairman of the Democratic Leadership Council he and developing kind of an alternative Democratic vision in. Opposition to or as an alternative to what was sort of traditional Democratic dogma.

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Stephanopoulos: [00:28:52] And I was just you know. I was more in the sort of traditional liberal wing of the party but recognized that that was necessary and also you know this is again part of Clinton's political genius. He knew again partly from how much he knew about the policy but he knew how to speak to. Every side of the Democratic Party and how to you know I think further progressive principles in a way that the people who might generally be opposed to it could accept I think that was you know part of what he could do so well.

Axelrod: [00:29:34] Yeah I mean he I mean I met with him about the same timeframe and you know came away as you were really impressed by both his grasp of politics and his grasp of politics. And to be able to combine those two things. I mean he and he has a county by county understanding of the politics of this country and I think part of it is being governor of a small southern state where you know retail politics was one of the rounds.

Stephanopoulos: [00:30:01] And a tireless student of it for his entire life.

Axelrod: [00:30:05] Yeah. No no. No doubt about it. So you signed on. I think that's when I met you.

Stephanopoulos: [00:30:11] We went to the Navy Pier named David Wilhelm as a campaign that was in late October I started in the beginning of the month and the play was just such a day again a different time. I went down to Little Rock the headquarters as a paint store two rooms of a presidential campaign. So when I first met your mayor Rahm Emanuel he started about. A month after I started I had this image of him standing on top of a table ordering people around him and he made a huge difference as well because he was the fundraiser and he had made sure he Clinton had just enough of a steak.

Axelrod: [00:30:58] Well you know I you. Yeah. Because you had a rocky road run there. I mean there are people who had written Clinton out of the script.

Stephanopoulos: [00:31:07] He had a great October November December and part of only when we saw you was kind of on a roll and people were seeing how special he was and Rahm was racing at the time what seemed like.

Axelrod: [00:31:19] He raised 4 million dollars and everybody was amazed.

Stephanopoulos: [00:31:26] Nothing today. But then January was just as tough as it gets.

Axelrod: [00:31:30] Jennifer Flowers.

Stephanopoulos: [00:31:31] Jennifer Flowers the draft at least two or three draft stories.

Axelrod: [00:31:35] About Clinton trying to avert the draft.

Stephanopoulos: [00:31:38] Avert the draft. Yeah.

Axelrod: [00:31:41] And it seemed like like a mortal politician would have died in those months. And you know.

Stephanopoulos: [00:31:48] I mean again everything has been. Sort of turbocharged in the modern era. But the things he survived then no one had survived before I it was partly just his will it was you know in fairness I mean you brought up Mario Cuomo. He actually flirted with coming back into the race in December and to the point where he had actually had a plane way down tarmac to fly to New Hampshire and I'm sitting down in my office in Little Rock and I think Clinton was about to get off a plane and I think it

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was Tennessee it might have been Kentucky. And you know we were preparing for what to do if Cuomo indeed got in. And at the time we were all acting like oh yes a good thing if he gets and we'll we'll take him on but sure enough just before Clinton get off the plane. We got we got word that Cuomo decided not to get in as I said you know don't go make the same. And he just left a gracious statement and it was it was fine.

Axelrod: [00:32:54] So the virtues became more apparent in the intervening minutes.

Stephanopoulos: [00:32:59] Oh yeah. They ended up having a very complicated relationship for the next several years.

Axelrod: [00:33:05] I actually had conversations with Cuomo about that. But that campaign was a turbulent.

Stephanopoulos: [00:33:14] Oh my god.

Axelrod: [00:33:15] Turbulent ride

Stephanopoulos: [00:33:15] We were it was it was life support for all of January and February. But then he would not give up. And in that last week of the New Hampshire primary he simply didn't sleep. And even though after those two stories you know from the draft he had he phoned at times to you know third place he ended up not winning. People forget that he came in second to Paul Tsongas there of course a sort of a native son but it was such a surprising recovery. Labeled himself the comeback kid and it worked. I mean that was always a credit where credit is due. That is a joint creation of man Grunwald and Paul Begala and he went down south and was able to you know win win in Georgia and then keep rolling along and end up you know took Tsongas out in the south and carrying on on for a little longer but sure enough the Illinois primary he'd become the nominee. But even then by the time he wins Illinois we're looking at a general election where he was polling in third place. Behind Ross Perot and George Bush George Bush Yeah. And and that's when Perot decided run up pretty Bush in his own kind of rocky primary in New Hampshire with Pat Buchanan for the first time. But it was that it was. He lost it in 1996. Dole actually lost he began and but on.

Axelrod: [00:34:52] Buchannan gave him a hard time

Stephanopoulos: [00:34:53] Gave him a very hard time.

Axelrod: [00:34:55] And then insinuated his way onto the stage at the convention which was a great day for you guys. One last thing on this because I want to move on to the White House. You were part of the worst rapid response in presidential history and you may have been part of the best in that campaign. How much of your experience from 88 informed I know you had James Carville.

Stephanopoulos: [00:35:22] I mean but it was just if you learned one thing from then which is something I ended up having to unlearn in the White House and I think people have had to learn even more today. But the driving philosophy of our rapid response was nothing goes unanswered. Nothing. And you're fighting it out literally every minute of every day.

Axelrod: [00:35:48] A little easier then because you didn't have.

Stephanopoulos: [00:35:50] We had three news cycles maybe you were going from a one or two news cycle day to maybe three and we did have some people work all night but there was no internet. The basic rhythms were still driven by the evening news and the deadlines for the for the papers and the

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morning news too. To a degree but not as much as it is today. But it completely different from what people face now which is it gets to my point of. I think part of what you guys had to deal with in the Obama campaign and people have to deal with even more now is learning what not to respond to.

Axelrod: [00:36:27] You know learning to chase rabbits. That's that.

Stephanopoulos: [00:36:30] And you don't want to be doing that all the time. But we felt that at the time it felt new that that's exactly what we had to do. And it was right for the time.

Axelrod: [00:36:39] Yeah yeah. And there was plenty to respond to. Clinton was quite a target then you went to the White House and you wrote a very compelling book about this called all too human. And in reading the book it was. It was a mixed experience at best. I mean the White House I can attest to is an incredible place. You learn more.

Stephanopoulos: [00:37:06] Every minute. I mean I always say that and I'm sure you felt the same way. You never feel smarter than when you're in the White House because you have. All information of the world right at your fingertips you could call anybody call anybody anytime. You're generally surrounded by the smartest eight or 10 people around a table this size. Yes. Ever going to be working with and including in both our cases and the presidents you worked with. And you're. A man and every decision matters. So you're playing at your highest level. But a lot of stress comes with that as well.

Axelrod: [00:37:46] Yeah. And you wrote about that. Talk about that. The stress that came with the experience.

Stephanopoulos: [00:37:53] Part of that was the job I had. You know I was at first as communications director and was doing the briefings. moved on to more of the role that I had in the campaign of being you know sort of senior policy and strategic adviser. But for Bill Clinton a lot of that wasn't a lot of my particular role was damage control was on on on all of the top stories and many of them self inflicted. Which meant that I was. In my own mind often fighting two or three front. Wars you know trying to answer these. Stories in public but dealing with. Many times not knowing all the facts even after asking. Many times not being entirely clear on what was really going on behind the scenes and dealing with you know and I get it the president or first lady who. Resented the fact that they had to answer a lot of the questions they were getting posed and they were being posed to them every day. And that created you know a fair amount of stress.

Axelrod: [00:39:04] Did you do you know listening to you. And it probably occurs to you you could be talking to Sean Spicer.

Stephanopoulos: [00:39:14] I I was and I've been in the White House a few times this spring. And. I guess it was in May. It was a I guess a week or two before Memorial Day was last time and I was in Sean's office he said hey you're going to last in the briefings longer than I did. Turned out he didn't. I mean that was the next day or that night. In fact when I was flying back. From the White House was when they put out the word that Comey had been fired which I think you know sort of. So much has changed or just been intensified since then. But yeah and I've talked to Sean about this. The differenc is I mean yeah and I deal with my own first briefings. You know Hillary Clinton wanted to close the press office door to the working press between the West Wing and the press like there was more and that was a big controversy at the time. We went back and forth on televising the briefing so that controversy is not new at all. The difference is and I know that a lot of people who listen don't accept this but there's a difference between advocacy and spin, and lying. And there is and I think that the in this White House the president's spokespeople have been put in they've put themselves there too but have been put in untenable positions. You know for Sean from the first day you're trying to make this argument.

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Axelrod: [00:40:50] About the crowd.

Stephanopoulos: [00:40:51] About the crowd and then a day later three days later trying to make the argument about how President Trump would have won but for the illegal votes in the popular vote but for illegal votes.

Axelrod: [00:41:04] And then later tweet about Obama.

Stephanopoulos: [00:41:06] The bugging him I mean they've had a series of things which are just flat out untrue and yet they go out. And either repeat them or refuse to correct them or refuse to get an answer from the president. You know the tapes for 40 40 something that's different. That's an entirely different has an entirely different quality to it.

Axelrod: [00:41:30] We're going to take another short break. We'll be right back with with George Stephanopoulos. At the end of your tenure at the White House. You guys lost the midterm elections. There were a lot of recriminations. The aforementioned David Wilhelm a friend of both of ours was chairman of the Democratic Party and was summarily dispatched said he was going back to Chicago where at least they stab you in the front. Which I always thought was a great line. And and and you had your own challenges in the White House because the president lost confidence in his team.

Stephanopoulos: [00:42:05] Right. And had a secret team. It became less of a guy named Dick Morris his old political consultant who not only was consulting in secret for a long time but also was at odds with a lot of the principles that President Clinton had run on.

Axelrod: [00:42:25] He wanted to move Clinton to the right. Dick Morris was very promiscuous in his.

Stephanopoulos: [00:42:32] And about and about as amoral a guys you could ever wanna meet.

Axelrod: [00:42:35] Worked for Jesse Helms. He had spanned the gamut.

Stephanopoulos: [00:42:39] And Trent Lott.

Axelrod: [00:42:40] And he started off as a here on the Upper West Side of New York working for Progressives.

Stephanopoulos: [00:42:45] Right he'd been been all over the map and now he's you know I'm not sure exactly. Way way way right ring white right wing. But you know there was a real after the midterms I stayed but there was a real existential struggle inside the White House for the direction of. The presidency for the things we believed in ended up in a titanic battle with the Republican then Republican Congress over the budget. And you know Clinton ended up I give him credit for this. In retrospect it was a tough tough fight. I have to say though it felt that was one of the more energizing times at the White House because he felt even though sometimes against people inside your right as your flakier sobriety for stuff that really really mattered you know the first government shut down and these huge cuts in Medicare that's back right now. You know one of the ironies when I think about it one of the big fights is whether or not you were going to propose a budget that would reach balance and at the time Newt Gingrich Dick Arme y all the Republicans were insisting on a budget to reach balance according to the Congressional Budget Office the CBO no the OMB. Now of course the Congressional Budget Office it is a disagreement among among even though it's run by a conservative Republican. But that was a big big fight. And you know then at the time we're were still battling these stories you know Paula Jones was filing a lawsuit against the president. There were stories still stories being it would be all over Breitbart if this were today

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but about some of his troopers in Arkansas saying that they helped him get women as well. Things he was all denied but which started to plant the seeds of future issues future problems because at the time they appointed a Special Counsel.

Axelrod: [00:44:44] You were for that you were going to have you advise am I wrong about this that you would advise the special counsel was inevitable. So you might as well get in front of it and say this has happened.

Stephanopoulos: [00:44:56] I always this whole debate and the Clintons still disagree with me on this Bernie Nussbaum disagrees and on this The idea that this was a choice this is fanciful. That's just not true.

Axelrod: [00:45:10] It is going to be forced.

Stephanopoulos: [00:45:11] It was if it was whether you were going to ask for before the five Democrats on the Judiciary Committee who would make the difference maybe was four at the time were going to request it anyway. And then it just happens to you.

Axelrod: [00:45:22] Your advice was don't look like you're resisting it because it looks like.

Stephanopoulos: [00:45:26] Two pieces of advice where I clashed with Hillary Clinton especially and Bernie Nussbaum and the president was in the middle and that's where you know we were having these debates. One was this whole issue of Whitewater people don't even know what it's about anymore because it was losing real estate investment in or out of about 20 \$30000 in Arkansas back in the 1970s. Now somehow this has become fodder for the special counsel but there already been one special counsel looked at it and saw that there was nothing wrong and I made the argument this was even before that I guess that whatever papers you have give them to because they're going to get them they're going to get them eventually anyway let them write the stories and then we can move on. They didn't do that. And that's what led to the first special counsel.

Axelrod: [00:46:15] Let me ask you a question about this. As you watch this last campaign and the way Hillary Clinton dealt with some of her issues the speeches that she gave that she didn't disclose the sort of slow rolling story of the e-mail.

Stephanopoulos: [00:46:32] Familiar.

Axelrod: [00:46:33] Yeah.

Stephanopoulos: [00:46:35] You know everybody's got their mix of you know gifts and flaws and this is I think one thing that is pretty consistent in the Clinton history and in Hillary Clinton's history is that you know for all her commitment to public service which is deep and lifelong and policy smarts which is also off the charts. She has a tough shell and a very protective shell and feels burned by the press and burned by the public and just gets into protective crouch over things that feel personal to her. And you know that the e-mail was one was one example of the speeches as another example she feels like she's being held to a different standard so she hunkered down. And I would you know I don't think that's a wrong that she's held to a different center but that's life that's politics that happens you know and you have to deal with the world as it comes sometimes you know. And you know when it really when I really felt it and it turned out ended up not to be the biggest deal in the world. It was it wasn't helpful. That Sunday when she fainted.

Axelrod: [00:47:47] I was very critical of her then.

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Stephanopoulos: [00:47:50] And I remember I called.

Axelrod: [00:47:53] It a six hour gap between her fainting and acknowledging that she had pneumonia and.

Stephanopoulos: [00:47:59] I called Nick Merrill when he came out with that first statement. I don't even remember what he said but I knew just didn't.

Axelrod: [00:48:07] Dehydrated or something.

Stephanopoulos: [00:48:09] And I just said Nick. And I don't even know anything. This is just purely based on intuition and experience. I said Nick, I don't think you know I just don't think you know. And sure enough you know.

Axelrod: [00:48:24] Yeah and what was interesting was I had the sense she didn't want to talk about that because she was being attacked by the by Rudy Giuliani and the Trump people about not being fit.

Stephanopoulos: [00:48:35] Yes. And Giuliani I mean wasn't what was what was Trump's word then it was on. It was one of his words he was using about whether she was ADHD she wasn't one word I was just yeah she'd barely campaigns.

Axelrod: [00:48:47] So that was there that was there I mean but I think you know I tweeted that day that I'm embarrassed or started a sentence that way. But I tweeted that day that the issue is stealth not health. And she exacerbated what was her deepest problem which was trust. Right. I mean you know it didn't turn out to be the biggest deal but it sure it was.

Stephanopoulos: [00:49:12] It was illustrative. But then you put yourself in this is where I give and then flip it around and say Put yourself in her shoes. She's running against someone who you know demonstrably on several different occasions says stuff that's flat out not true. You know I saw thousands of Muslims cheering on 9 9 11 he's all over the map on policy. He's not releasing his taxes and she's thinking you're hitting me for being secretive.

Axelrod: [00:49:43] Right. Right. But as you say politics ain't fair. Got to deal with it as but I do I think there was too much reliance frankly on his deficiencies there was too much of a sense that people would see that and would you know.

Stephanopoulos: [00:49:59] Clearly in retrospect definitely.

Axelrod: [00:50:03] Well let me just because I don't want to run out of time here because I want I want to come back to Trump and the media. But you made this leap after leaving the house. And when I quit my job at the Chicago Tribune Doug Nyland who is an editor at The Tribune. Always remember he told me you know you'll never be able to come back if you cross this line. But you were a very visible partisan and you were able to make the leap too.

Stephanopoulos: [00:50:31] Well and I wasn't the first who did that. I mean.

Axelrod: [00:50:34] Tim Russert.

Stephanopoulos: [00:50:35] Tim Russert had done it and he worked for Governor Cuomo. Actually DIANE SAWYER.

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Axelrod: [00:50:39] Yes. Richard Nixon.

Stephanopoulos: [00:50:40] Worked for Richard Nixon. Bill Moyers and it worked for Lyndon Johnson. I think generally by the time I came along there was more like you get one move you just get to go back and forth. But when I first left I didn't know for sure this was what I was going to do I came on ABC and now it turns out I've been there 20 years. Been here 20 years. As an as an analyst as a you know sort of a point of view. It was only over time that I made that a full time job and Luganda reporting and anchoring. But I knew that I had in order to be accepted in this role had to be sort of transparent about it. And I had different goals for myself at different times when I was a. Pundit and analyst. I sort of thought the best way it could be true to my past work and true to the job of being an analyst was to basically say on the air what I would say in a meeting in the White House which would not necessarily agree with what the president did but would you know sort of be true to the arguments I made at the time. As. You know when I started to become a reporter and an anchor I knew that people were skeptical and I just had to be scrupulous about. We've we've actually talked about this before but two things one being fair to both sides but also not overcompensating and ending just to look like you're being tougher on the side you used to work to work on. And that was that was a balancing act for a long time but I always knew it was going to be up to the viewers and the people I was covering to determine whether or not I was doing a fair job.

Axelrod: [00:52:39] And it was it hard for you to sort of shed the the the mantle of partisanship. You know if this was television that pause would be read as.

Stephanopoulos: [00:53:02] Well it is, I was thinking of the honest way to answer it. It took time. It definitely it definitely took time. Now one of the things that you know that sort of ended up complicating it, that was kind of a fraught time. While this is happening you know the whole Monica Lewinsky thing blows up. This is all after I left the White House. And that's.

Axelrod: [00:53:25] Tough to comment on that.

Stephanopoulos: [00:53:26] Well yes and no. I mean. This goes back to the point I was trying to make about what. I. Felt like. The way to be true to myself was to make the arguments I would have been making inside. And the truth was that you know I was appalled by this. You know when I went to work for Bill Clinton in 19 in '91 '92 he had already part of the reason he didn't run in 1988 people thought was because of these questions about his personal behavior. And. I was defending him against. Charges that I was told were untrue for years. But the whole implicit and to some degree explicit bargain was or contract was you know you're going to put people out to defend you on this that that means you're not going to you know make the problem worse. You know you know you're in the White House now. And to me that was just you know should have been pitch for it. No but you know incredibly reckless and irresponsible and selfish. Act and that's the key. That's what I said as a commentator and it.

Axelrod: [00:54:43] Probably wasn't well-received at the White House.

Stephanopoulos: [00:54:45] Probably.

Axelrod: [00:54:47] Did you hear from them. Or others.

Stephanopoulos: [00:54:50] Others. But you know it was a very fraught time I heard from a lot of different people I know.

Axelrod: [00:54:55] If you did get into a jam a couple of years ago you're an incredibly generous person. My own you know foundation I'm very close to you. You've been a supporter of your support. You gave

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some contributions to the Clinton foundation and you've acknowledged that probably the optics of that probably were not even if the intentions were.

Stephanopoulos: [00:55:17] I mean I don't think there was anything. I think it's a good charity. I'm glad I supported it in that respect but it was done given the role I had. I would say that when I was making these contributions this is a time when you know Mitt Romney was chairing the Clinton Initiative it became something different. It looked different in that in that in the middle of the campaign and I should have had even I did disclose it. I should have had more disclosures than I had and I certainly copped to that. But.

Axelrod: [00:55:49] It may have cost you a presidential debate.

Stephanopoulos: [00:55:52] Yes it may have definitely cost me the Republican debate

Axelrod: [00:55:57] That's life. I just want to ask you one question about your dual hatted role. I mean you really where three heads at ABC is you know as their sort of chief anchor and on Good Morning America and the Sunday show Good Morning America piece which is an incredible franchise for ABC. You know you you people know you as the guy on Sunday who's challenging policy makers on.

Stephanopoulos: [00:56:30] Some people do. GMA is very different. Yeah. You were my first interview on Jimmy. Oh is that right. Yes you were my first actual interview.

Axelrod: [00:56:44] But it wasn't on cooking or anything.

Stephanopoulos: [00:56:46] No. Yeah it was a different.

Axelrod: [00:56:51] I mean how do you how how have you embraced that role. And what's the upside of it. I mean obviously the upside.

Stephanopoulos: [00:57:00] It turns out. I mean. Again when. I sort of felt I actually said no to the job three times. But. The more I said no the more it became clear to me that. I was putting. A pretty hard ceiling in my career if I said no. You can say no. Yeah but you know you're going anywhere not going anywhere. I was never I would never be the chief anchor. I would never be doing the anchoring election night anything like that. If if I said no this is they needed. Mm hmm. How long have you been there long time. Seven years.

Axelrod: [00:57:43] Yeah. What do you look at the television news numbers. Obviously there are a lot more outlets now but they're very they're it's not encouraging in terms of the trajectory. Morning television may be in better shape no more Actually morning and Sunday out of shape than anything else of course for you.

Stephanopoulos: [00:58:03] Sunday is getting. We're getting some numbers. In some cases better than we're getting eight 10 years ago. I mean both Obama and I you know it was actually the tougher time was in. The early 2000s. Obama brought back a lot of interest in Trump is and Trump has done this.

Axelrod: [00:58:24] Like a shiny object. Let me ask you one question on that. Do you think Trump obviously has a real instinct for self promotion and understands television you know. Yes and no but yeah but he was certainly the cable and he you yourself on fire and that people are going to turn their cameras on and he lit it lit himself on fire. Did he game television news?

Stephanopoulos: [00:58:53] Well this gets back to something we were talking about this goes back to the Hillary conversation as well. He clearly. Gamed cable. I don't know any game but I could argue he gamed

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all of us somebody obviously thought a lot about this and me.

Axelrod: [00:59:09] Calling your Sunday shows everybody let them do that.

Stephanopoulos: [00:59:11] Right.

Axelrod: [00:59:12] Nobody else really good got to do.

Stephanopoulos: [00:59:15] Actually no one else. Actually ever thought of that. Well that's that that's the way that he gamed it. But you know I'm of two minds of this because a lot of the people who complain about how much coverage we're giving him we invite them on every day. They don't come on. I mean he had to because this goes back to when I like look at my own. Role in this. And you know did we do something wrong we not fair Did we give him too much coverage. I look at every interview I did. They were tough interviews. And again these were interviews that if other people gave the answers he gave not just to me but to others as well. You know in a different world they were interviews and answers that politicians just. Didn't survive. You know. You know whether it's you know attacking John McCain for his time as a prisoner of war when you didn't go how many times when I campaigned did did the political intelligence's say that's it. He's never going to survive this. I remember one big interview I did was after their convention I flew out to Colorado and that was the interview where he after was at the. Democratic convention where he attacked con and his wife and I remember walking out of the interview and Trump now presenter he was very mad at me. And he was you know really as angry as I've ever seen him and he was yelling at me but it was about a different part of the interview was about the questions I've been asking him about Putin which is get on their own would have been.

Axelrod: [01:00:51] He seems testy on that subject. Where do you think this is all going. I mean coverage of the presidency and the presidency itself. You've got a perspective on both.

Stephanopoulos: [01:01:03] I would think on that. Having worked in a white house that was under the thumb of the special council. For several years they have no idea. What the special council starts and certainly Ken Starr did. Remember he was appointed. For. Two years before Monica Lewinsky came into the White House. That's what ended up being what Bill Clinton got impeached over. Yeah the special counsels can go in any direction they want.

Axelrod: [01:01:33] I think they have some idea which is why he seems to be laying the predicate for or at least Newt Gingrich and others are laying the predicate for somehow removing Mueller which seems like a cataclysmic decision

Stephanopoulos: [01:01:45] You would think. Having just read a book I would recommend all of your listeners the fantastic new biography of Richard Nixon. And it brings you back to the the the Watergate times and the Saturday Night Massacre. This. I can't imagine A president surviving a move like that but he's defied everybody in this case perhaps is different if he's trying to think this one through. The deputy attorney general is now in charge of Mueller who would have to do it Rod Rosenstein is not going to fire Robert Mueller so he's going to resign.

Axelrod: [01:02:34] Yeah that's why this Saturday Night Massacre.

Stephanopoulos: [01:02:37] Square. Squared or cubed.

Axelrod: [01:02:40] That's break glass time.

Stephanopoulos: [01:02:42] Yeah.

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Axelrod: [01:02:42] If they do that I listen we could talk about this and I suspect we will be talking about this quite a bit. I just want to say the reason why you have a faithful audience is that you bring the passion of someone who has been a practitioner and who understands the process and who has reverence for it.

Stephanopoulos: [01:03:05] I do have reverence for it. I mean that's what you're saying. But my time in the White House as you know was a mixed experience. That's true. And maybe this is looking back with rose colored glasses. Professional experience of my life. How could it not be I mean to have that kind of privilege to have that kind of chance to work on what you care about at the highest level in a way that matters every single day is once in a lifetime. And I wouldn't trade it for anything.

Axelrod: [01:03:36] Well that comes shining through in your coverage and in your conversations each Sunday and during the week. And I appreciate you and I appreciate being with you.

Axelrod: [01:03:47] This was fun. Thank you.