

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO INSTITUTE OF POLITICS & CNN PRESENT

# THE AXE FILES

## The Axe Files - Ep. 186: Bakari Sellers

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[00:00:06] And now from the University of Chicago Institute of Politics and CNN. The Axe Files with your host David Axelrod.

**Axelrod:** [00:00:16] Any list of promising young political leaders in the country would include Bakari Sellers who has an amazing story elected to the South Carolina legislature at the age of 22 ran for lieutenant governor at 30. Now a widely followed commentator on CNN and elsewhere and also a fellow at the Institute of Politics at the University of Chicago where I caught up with him to talk about his life and career his family's celebrated history in the civil rights movement and the future.

**Axelrod:** [00:00:55] Bakari Sellers. My friend it's great great to see you. You are I know the Prince of Denmark. Denmark, South Carolina. But I I was saying to you before we start rolling I was really overwhelmed when I did a little research. I knew your dad was a significant figure in the history of the civil rights movement but I didn't realize how significant until I look more deeply into it but tell me a little bit about Cleveland Sellers.

**Sellers:** [00:01:34] My mom and dad both put a a high value on education in our household growing up. But even more importantly than that we had to understand and know where we were coming from. My father was shot on February 8th 1968 in Orangeburg South Carolina. He was national.

**Axelrod:** [00:01:52] Explain the significance of Orangeburg because that was known as the orange orange massacre. It was a real landmark and a sad landmark in the history of race relations in this country.

**Sellers:** [00:02:05] I think that in 1968 you had the Orangeburg Massacre first and then subsequently you had the assassination of King and Kennedy so it was definitely a rough year. But students at that campus they were protesting what the history books called the last vestige of discrimination in Orangeburg. It was a whites only bowling alley. They went down on the 6th then they protested the police. These are students from South Carolina State University which is in Orangeburg. And the police at the time and state troopers came and surrounded the students and they beat many of the students with police batons that night. Mr. Stroman and John Stroman.

**Axelrod:** [00:02:42] Claiming that they had been shot at. There was no evidence.

**Sellers:** [00:02:45] That was on the 8th. So this was on the 6th [crosstalk]

**Sellers:** [00:02:49] And so you know many of the students were beat John Stroman says that he witnessed a young lady being held by two state troopers while another one beat her with a baton. Then came the seventh. Nothing happened then came the 8th when the students went and protested again this time when state troopers came they got the right idea. They went back to their campus and they bought a huge bonfire. And for eight seconds South Carolina state troopers fired shots into the group of students not rubber bullets or tear gas but double deadly double that buckshot the same bullets were used to hunt deer. They killed three Henry Smith

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Samuel Hammond and Delano Middleton and they wounded upwards of 29 college students. Actually one of the young men who was killed that night. Delano Middleton was 17 years old. He was a high school student who was actually there to walk his mom home from work who was a custodian on the campus and so. My.

**Axelrod:** [00:03:45] Your father was not a student there.

**Sellers:** [00:03:46] My father was not a student there my father was residing across the street from the campus. And the students they would seek out his dad and.

**Axelrod:** [00:03:58] We we should just back up and say your dad had a history in the civil rights movement that predated this that went back to 1960 when there was this effort to desegregate lunch counters.

**Sellers:** [00:04:11] Correct.

**Axelrod:** [00:04:11] In Orangeburg.

**Sellers:** [00:04:12] In Denmark a Voorhees College.

**Axelrod:** [00:04:16] In Denmark. And he was just a kid at the time.

**Sellers:** [00:04:20] Yeah. That's the most amazing part about the movement at that time and I guess very similar to today that many of the individuals who push the envelope of change in this country were kids. I mean my dad was 15 16 years old. His parents were scared to death of him getting involved in the movement. He went to Howard University where he befriended Stokely Carmichael Stokely graduated and then convinced my dad to drop out of school. So my dad dropped out of Howard went to Miami University of Ohio where snake was doing training for Freedom Summer Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and Stokely Carmichael was of course Stokely Carmichael made Terrey as he was his name when he passed away. But Stokely Carmichael is the godfather of my sister he was my father's best friend my father. We were talking about the Orangeburg massacre. All the officers who fired into the group of students were charged but they were all found not guilty. They actually arrested my father that night while he was shot. They charged him with five felony counts. They ended up back. They did then let me ask you about that. Did they know who he was and not to be a conspiracy theorist but if you look at the slide that going around so be my guest. Now. This one may have some foundation. If you look at Henry Smith and my father at the time they looked nearly identical in Henry Smith actually was shot in the head. And so my father maintains that theory that he carries a lot of of of heart ache about that night because he feels as if Henry Smith was probably dead because they wanted him dead. You had three young men. So he feels he was maybe being targeted and targeted. Yeah I mean they had a they actually at his home across the street they had a tank. The South Carolina Law Enforcement Division had their tank pointed directly at his home. And so that's why he was on campus because he wanted to get out of that house and he went and he stayed on campus that night. And was he in Orangeburg was he living they were living in and organize students there. He was hoping to restart school at South Carolina State. My father ended up subsequently graduating from Shaw University because he dropped out of Howard and then he was arrested. And this kind of threw everything off track in between the time of his trial and. His arrest. It was a few years. He got his two and a half years

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to get his master's from Harvard. So he's probably the only person in the South Carolina Department of Corrections with a master's from Harvard. But the interesting thing is when they when they arrested him that night on February 8th and transported him there was that they used to call the jail in Orange Park the pink Castle because it was a pink building and he came out to a castle hardly a castle. And he had a sleeping on and he had these highwater jeans and some Chuck Taylors. And they transported him all the way up from Orange Grove to Columbia. They blocked off the interstate which is 40 miles and no one was allowed. And everybody was pushed off it was the first and only time in our state's history they completely shut down the interstate and they held them on death row. He was housed on death row for about two or three weeks.

**Axelrod:** [00:07:30] And that was I guess purportedly for his own safety. Is that what they said.

**Sellers:** [00:07:35] They deemed him to be an outside agitator. And so they did not want him to be mixing with other.

**Axelrod:** [00:07:41] Oh I see because they thought he might incite.

**Sellers:** [00:07:43] Yeah he was being charged with rioting and my dad is the first and only one man riot in this country. He went to jail for rioting.

**Axelrod:** [00:07:51] And he was the only one ever convicted right relative to the massacre.

**Sellers:** [00:07:55] And subsequently pardoned later in life. But yeah he was convicted.

**Axelrod:** [00:08:02] Wrote a book while he was in prison.

**Sellers:** [00:08:05] The River of No Return. It's a great book. It's the story of a SNCC militant as he calls it. If you look at many of the images I remember a few. There was one when Stokely Carmichael first coined the term black power in Mississippi and my father is right behind them with a stoic look in a white T-shirt with his sleeves rolled up and then if you see Dr. King marching down the street you'll see like my father like right behind him. And so he's always been right there. And

**Axelrod:** [00:08:37] you know those two guys Stokely Carmichael and Martin Luther King represented a kind of a divergence in the civil rights movement. When you talk about your father and how young he was when he did the lunch boycott it made me think of my conversation with John Lewis who similarly.

**Sellers:** [00:08:56] Powerful interview.

**Axelrod:** [00:08:57] Thank you went off to college in Tennessee. I guess Nashville.

**Sellers:** [00:09:04] Yes.

**Axelrod:** [00:09:05] And and was involved in trying to desegregate. And his parents were absolutely terrified terrified for him and the story that stories that he told about time after time after time just putting himself in situations where he where he literally was putting his life at risk

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and certainly was putting himself in line to get beaten or bitten. And of course he did ultimately get beaten almost to death at Selma and he was just a kid.

**Sellers:** [00:09:39] My father. What what motivated my father to be a part of the movement was Emmett Till. He says when he was young he would always keep a picture of Emmett Till he said the bravest woman he knew was Emmett Till's mother because she elected to allow there to be an open casket.

**Axelrod:** [00:09:57] Murdered as a 13 year old just allegedly whistling and.

**Sellers:** [00:10:01] We just found out that whole story was concocted a few months ago by the woman he was alleged to have whistled at correct.

**Axelrod:** [00:10:07] And so and so and then you just get that image the open casket was in the 1950s was a was a galvanizing event in the history of the civil rights movement.

**Sellers:** [00:10:21] And so when you think about that in my father's first mission was to go to Philadelphia Mississippi. He was in Philadelphia Mississippi. He always says that you know Emmett Till's and you know some of the names of the black bodies that are floating in swamps and creeks in Mississippi but there are hundreds of others that went unnamed. And so he was hiding in barns and sheds.

**Axelrod:** [00:10:46] During the Mississippi Freedom Summer.

**Sellers:** [00:10:47] Correct.

**Axelrod:** [00:10:48] And Philadelphia Mississippi of course is where those three civil rights workers were found murdered.

**Sellers:** [00:10:56] They were friends of his. They had all been in Miami University of Ohio together where they were doing their training. And so that's why he was put on that mission to go in and look for their bodies. And when you think about this you're talking about kids looking for kids.

**Axelrod:** [00:11:11] Yeah. Where I was going on on the fissure in the civil rights movement is that Martin Luther King John Lewis were steadfast believers in nonviolence. And there were differences about that and there were other leaders and Stokely Carmichael was one of them who didn't believe that your father had marched behind King and stood by Stokely Carmichael where was he in that discussion.

**Sellers:** [00:11:48] My father will tell you that he was a radical. There's no question my father would chant Black Power but black power wasn't a militant phrase at the time it was co-opt that black power meant economic power. Even more importantly political power. It wasn't. It wasn't some galvanizing phrase to have an assembly of black rage by any stretch but it meant being self-sufficient in retaking your communities and then empowering your communities. But they pushed I sometimes we look back on people like Dr. King or Muhammad Ali and we don't understand them to be as militant as they were. And although there was a definite non-violent message of Dr. King Dr. King very much pushed the envelope when it came to various protest

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tactics or demonstrations and so I think my father was a part of a younger group. Snake was a younger organization then in SLC and Dr. King and many other ministers. And there was tension between the groups. But my father was a definite rebel and militant to say the least.

**Axelrod:** [00:12:56] It was interesting to hear Louis talk about about what happened in Mississippi and the death of those civil rights workers and the death of Viola Liuzzo who was a civil rights worker from Detroit because he he said that. And they knew this that when white Americans were being beaten or killed that that would that would galvanize the country. And they were right about that. So nonviolence did not mean lack of violence it means it meant in certain ways submitting to violence.

**Sellers:** [00:13:39] February first 1960 you had the three students from North Carolina A&T that sat in at the words counter sparked the quote unquote sit in movement. But if you look at the violence that they endured at that one moment I mean they were you know white customers were pouring milkshakes on US spitting on them they were throwing hamburgers at them. I mean but it wasn't until those images were seen around the world on the Edmund Pettus Bridge where people were like holy hell yeah. You know the trauma that black Southerners are going through. The 16th Street bombing I mean it literally bombed a church and killed.

**Axelrod:** [00:14:13] Killed 4 little girls.

**Sellers:** [00:14:14] Yeah. And so.

**Axelrod:** [00:14:14] In Alabama you should. I highly recommend to you. You may have been there already. But others well we did the Lewis interview in a museum in Atlanta a Civil Rights Museum where they have a facsimile of the lunch counter and you can put your hands on the counter and a headset on and hear a depiction of what those young men and women heard when they were sitting at the lunch counter and it is a horrifying thing brought Lewis to tears because it was so because it was so real. And where was your mom in all of this.

**Sellers:** [00:14:56] My mom went to Gustavus Adolphus in Minnesota and she was the daughter of a very prominent black pastor at the time who kept her pretty well removed from the civil rights movement until my father caught up with her and found him. My mom was in higher education for a number of years 20 30 40 years. And so that's where we got this insatiable desire to to always be on this journey for knowledge acquisition. But she was always a very strong supporter of my father and I think that she might. My sister's name know where they were together during this period when he was my sister's name is Nosizwe Abadime Sellers. It's Swahili. Abadime means born while Father is away because she was born while my father was incarcerated. And the first the first picture they have together. I can't the gentleman's name in the prison who took it but she was able to bring it and they were sitting on the yard and she was able to bring in a camera. And they had their big afros and my dad has on his blue prison denims and he's holding my sister for the first time. And so you know there was a lot of difficulty that she had to go through as a woman as a mother as a wife because you know my father's activism took him out of her life for a while. And further he you know they grew up on my brother and sister had to deal with instances of welfare a little more because it's difficult to be black and have a felony in the south in which he had. And so although he was able to know.

**Axelrod:** [00:16:34] He went on and got a doctorate and became.

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**Sellers:** [00:16:37] A professor and you know was an integral part of the African-American Studies Department at South Carolina and a college president.

**Axelrod:** [00:16:44] But that took time.

**Sellers:** [00:16:45] That took time as the quote says life ain't always been no crystal stair.

**Axelrod:** [00:16:49] Yeah. Now you came along a lot later.

**Sellers:** [00:16:52] I was an accident.

**Axelrod:** [00:16:54] But a happy accident to assert that in 1984 and. Growing up was this history very much part of the household conversation.

**Sellers:** [00:17:09] No question. I mean you know when I go to D.C. I have to go see Uncle Marion. Marion Barry. And he would take me around and we get hot dogs on the street. You know we knew some of the more radical figures like rap Brown. You know Kathleen Cleaver would call the house. Julian Bond was my just everything. I mean he was one of my father's very very good friends but he just meant so much to all of us. And so. You know we didn't I didn't read history books you lived I lived it. And many people who are we call it we refer to ourselves as children of the movement and many of us who are children of the movement. Even little Jessie can tell you the same thing. You have a certain ownership and pride of that torch and you make sure it doesn't burn out.

**Axelrod:** [00:18:03] And was it. How did you process this as a kid in terms of your own aspirations. Because I'd say if you look the word precocious up in the dictionary your picture would be there. I mean you. You started high school it was like 12 years old and you finished college when you were 20. You were a legislator by the time you were 22. Lawyer by the time you were 23 what was it that motivated you. Where did you think you were going.

**Sellers:** [00:18:32] I was I. I was and am angrier at my great state of South Carolina for February 8th 1968 than I think my father even is. And I think a lot of that anger I'm writing right now is called Anger is not Sin but I think a lot of that anger fueled me wanting to be a change agent. And I just had to figure out how to get there. And I wanted to be a part of that as quickly as possible and so my ascension was was a little quicker and I wouldn't change anything or trade anything in the world. But it was driven by an anger for the condition. I have total joy and read once on Sunday morning. We were in Charleston after the Charleston massacre. I said my father at the time he was 70 and I was 30 or 40 years apart and we had many of the same shared experiences and that drives me crazy. And so you know shared experiences in terms of dealing with there's discrimination discrimination burying people we love because of racism and and hate. You know you look at some of those socio economic conditions that many people of color grow up in punished because of the zip code that they're born into. Not far from where we're sitting today. You can go to East Chicago and you had the environmental injustices that are comparable to that of Flint. And so trying to grapple and destruct deconstruct all of these systems is just a continuation of my father's journey. He ran for office at one time. Yeah I was way more successful.

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**Axelrod:** [00:20:10] What did he run for.

**Sellers:** [00:20:11] He ran for a city council in Greensboro North Carolina. We were. My father didn't return to South Carolina after he was let go from prison. His mom and dad didn't want him to come back at all. So he resettled in Greensboro and went to Ewan's e.g. to get his doctorate Cetra. So he ran for office. He was the national Southern Regional Field Director for Jesse Jackson in 1984 and was always around politics. I don't know if he won many races.

**Axelrod:** [00:20:46] Yeah yeah. Did you did you know early on that politics was a way that that you wanted to go that that was you said you want to be a change agent.

**Sellers:** [00:21:01] That was what our parents told us. They gave us a few rules up one they were gonna pay for you to go to college if you went to an historically black college or university you'd go to a majority institution after that. And so I went to Morehouse my brother went to Morehouse. My sister went to Xavier. And two you had to be a change agent. And so my brother actually went in the ministry. My sister is a doctor and I was a lawyer who wanted to be in politics. I didn't get the bug the political bug which you just cannot get rid of until I went to Capitol Hill and worked for United States Congressman James Clyburn in college and. Between Jim Clyburn and Shirley Franklin. I've been the mayor of Atlanta I've been consumed with politics as my my life went to take a short break and we'll be right back with Bakari Sellers.

**Axelrod:** [00:21:57] So you say you caught the bug. What was it about being on the Hill that that is so Atlanta. And how old were you when you were doing that.

**Sellers:** [00:22:08] 17. I think it was a sophomore in college. So bit freshman sophomore college of 17. You know who was the secretary of state when the hanging chad episode came. CATHERINE.

**Axelrod:** [00:22:24] Oh yes.

**Sellers:** [00:22:25] Katherine Harris.

**Axelrod:** [00:22:26] HARRIS Yes. In Florida

**Sellers:** [00:22:28] Florida. And so one of the things that I remember is Katherine Harris was a new Congress Congressman and people contrary to popular belief. South Carolina is the largest producer of peaches not Georgian. And so every year one of the members of the South Korean delegation would be able to deliver peaches to all 535 people and Katherine Harris was in my next stop I was a baby delivering ph I was delivering peaches and role of a congressional candidate a humbling experience a humbling experience. So I'll just tell you that we were very very resentful of having to deliver Katherine Harris those peaches. But I saw that story just to say that you were always around the epicenter of power and change. And I mean at that time the discourse maybe I just want to believe this but the discourse was a lot more civil than it is now but it is a low bar low bar. It consumed me and Jim Clyburn and Shirley Franklin they taught me something that I live about a day which is. Can never be about politics it has to be about public service. And they didn't look at themselves as politicians as shrewd and they both are very good ones. Yes. They looked at themselves as public servants and so I would not be anywhere near successful in politics without those two.

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**Axelrod:** [00:23:50] So tell me about running for state rep when you were 22 and presumably the youngest ever and in South Carolina.

**Sellers:** [00:23:59] You got to talk to David Beasley me and David Beasley get into this all the time. But yes I was the youngest ever he assumes that he was. But he's he's great. I announce when I see the list in case he's listening I announce when I was twenty one years ago at our truck depot train depot 'scuse me and.

**Axelrod:** [00:24:18] You were just out of you just graduated.

**Sellers:** [00:24:20] I just graduated from Morehouse. I was in my one L year of law school at the University of South Carolina. I came downstairs and I told my mom and dad I was going to run for the South Carolina House of Representatives and my mom was cooking spaghetti. My dad was on the cook island going through the newspaper as he always does and without any hesitation my mom said I'll vote for you. And my dad said I'll think about it. And that was my announcement to them that I was going to do it. And I went out and I had maybe 40 people at my announcement. And then for nine months I had a plan for nine months. Every Friday night I was usually at a high school football game a basketball game every Saturday and Sunday. I was knocking on doors and as the election got closer I began to knock on more doors. But June 13 2006 I beat Representative Thomas Road who was 82 years old and the oldest member in the South Carolina House who had been in been in the legislature for 26 years. And before that. He was the chair of the County Council and before that he delivered milk. And so everyone knew who he was and we won 55 to 45. And it was just one of the best days of my life.

**Axelrod:** [00:25:29] How much money by the way did it cost you.

**Sellers:** [00:25:30] Twenty six thousand dollars. And for anyone listening who wants to go into politics there is a virtue to running a campaign like that because I would get like five dollars from the old lady who wore the big hat who said on the front row in my church. But I mean she wanted that five dollars to win. So she was on the phone. She was making phone calls she was baking brownies for my team. And so we didn't have any you know high priced consultants or anything we just had somebody who knew how to cut maps and people who wanted to knock on doors with me that was the extent of how large did that volunteer organization become over the course of your campaign. It got pretty big guy had some law school friends that would come down. You know we would have 20 people out there knocking sometimes. And I believed that I needed to touch each voter three times. That means I wanted to knock on their door. I wanted them to get a piece of mail from me and I wanted to call their home and it was actually a decent strategy. I don't know if a strategy at that unsophisticated could work anymore but it did.

**Axelrod:** [00:26:33] So what's it like to go to the South Carolina legislature as a as a 22 year old.

**Sellers:** [00:26:42] During our orientation period by the way my freshman class was pretty pretty cool. The vice president of Vice Chair whatever he was called my freshman class was none other than Mick Mulvaney. Oh is that right. Fletcher direct budget director. So for me Donald Trump my trajectory as friends were were really interesting make as a friend so Mick Mulvaney was budget director. Governor is Budget Director Governor at the time was Mark

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Sanford United States congressman. The two years before I got elected there was a young lady named Nikki Haley got elected the legislature the legislature and two years after I was elected we had a young freshman legislator that I used to make. Go get me coffee and everything by the name of Tim Scott. And so we I had some interesting experiences but I remember during my orientation period the.

**Axelrod:** [00:27:40] Lemme just stop you before you get to your orientation period because you said something that I think in this environment people would say would strike people as as odd. And I think it's important to talk about it which is you say Mulvaney was it was is your friend and you probably get this all the time I do. You know like I can't believe you're friends with this person or that person. Explain that. Because you know you obviously have great passion about issues that Donald Trump is right in the middle. Mulvaney is clearly you know the point of the spear on his on a lot of.

**Sellers:** [00:28:20] Mick Mulvaney is brilliant. And Mick Mulvaney is somebody who I've always got along with on a very personal level. He was somebody who was always kind. He was kind of my family. He would bring his family around and we used to always say that we both want the best for South Carolina and we just have two vastly different ways of trying to get there.

**Axelrod:** [00:28:41] And probably vastly different constituencies too.

**Sellers:** [00:28:44] Vastly different constituencies. You know Mick beat somebody who I admire and think is a hero. But as is politics you know you were there when John Spratt carried the water for the ACA and the White House and everything and everyone else and making.

**Axelrod:** [00:29:02] He went down in the deluge of 2010.

**Sellers:** [00:29:05] Correct. And so one of the things that's amazing about that is after Mulvaney became a quote unquote rock star and celebrity and even now in his position he still text me when he sees me on STATE OF THE UNION in the morning he'll he'll say Good job. The same with Nikki Haley. I talked to Nikki Haley once a month via text or once every she's done something I like. I'm like I'm proud of you. Thank you for representing the state well and even if it's something I politically disagree with I will say how's your family. How the kids because you know they didn't really ask for all of this and they're having to live in that fishbowl.

**Axelrod:** [00:29:38] I mean I just you know the reason I stopped you is because you know my theory is that we have to be able to find common ground common ground and the humanity in each other. And it's easier to hate people if you don't know them.

**Sellers:** [00:29:58] And when I tell you that one of my favorite people I've served with is Mark Sanford. Truly Mark Sanford invited me to his governor's mansion on a number of occasions. And the reason he brought me back the second time is because he wanted to sit down. He and his wife at the time Jenny wanted to sit down with me and have a conversation about my father's book about the river of no return. They literally invited me as a 20 to 23 year old legislator over to the governor's mansion just to talk about my father and the history of South Carolina. And so just those moments Tim is the same way.

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**Axelrod:** [00:30:30] Does that ever translate into actually being able to work together on any issues like in your experience.

**Sellers:** [00:30:38] Mark Sanford probably not he was. He didn't really have a whole bunch of teammates even on the Republican side of the aisle. And he's still kind of off on his own. He's on his own. But you know I mean you know where he's coming from is Mark is Mark Tim on the other hand I and Trey Gowdy and Trey Gowdy as well. Tres treys invited me up to testify at the next hearing they're having on criminal justice reform. So you know. Are you diametrically opposed politically on some things yes but are you able to find some common ground in some places. Yes. And so as a as a black Democrat in South Carolina who for my eight years I served would have to go outside and take a deep breath under the auspices of the Confederate flag. You look for those moments where you can have some semblance of success. And even if that means that I have to go to Tim Scott or Lindsey Graham who was my only United States Senator Jim DeMint didn't do anything. Well Mark Sanford or Nikki Haley or Mick Mulvaney. Then you do that because you know my constituents come from communities that are very poor in the quarter of shame where the heating and air don't work and the infrastructure is falling apart where kids go to school. And so you search for those successes and sometimes you have to go through ours to get there.

**Axelrod:** [00:31:58] And it ultimately was Governor Haley who took the those flags down.

**Sellers:** [00:32:06] She deserves. She deserves a modicum of credit. I think you know it's a moment that I was interviewing Kirsten Gillibrand recently and she said she hasn't voted for. I don't think but one or two of Donald Trump's appointees. I mean she said that she voted for Nikki Haley because Nikki Haley took the flag down and she must have compassion. And I don't really correct a lot of people when they say that. But it does rubs me the wrong way because nine people died so that flag will come down. You know that night when Clem was when Clem was murdered Senator Pinckney's was a friend of yours. Yeah. So our districts overlapped. I was a House member in his Senate district overlap mine district and when I first got there he was the youngest state senator so he you know had a huge booming voice and was someone who took me under their wing one of my last campaign events in my I guess it was an ill fated but not successful run for lieutenant governor was at his church we had a fish fry. But I tell you this to say that one of the most difficult things law enforcement has to do is when they walk into a murder scene or a scene where there's a lot of death and devastation and they hear those phones ringing people trying to find their loved ones. I was one of those phones ringing that night. Because when I heard that someone had shot up Mother Emanuel first thing I did was call Clem.

**Axelrod:** [00:33:32] You know let me ask you about that because you you were you were quoted and you've talked about the fact that guns is part of the culture or part of the culture of South Carolina. And you know you've tried to walk that line as a legislator. First of all explain a little bit about that culture because this is a discussion that you know if you come from where we're sitting right now and parents are looking out the window worrying about whether their kids will get home from school without getting shot guns have a completely different meaning than if you grow up in rural correct South Carolina. So tell me as someone who walks that line.

**Sellers:** [00:34:20] Guns are very prevalent in the south. And you know as a southern southern Democrat I took my concealed weapons permit class next to Nikki Haley. We got our concealed

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weapons permit and shot. Well you have to take a shooting test. We took it together. That doesn't mean though that we don't want sensible gun ownership and common sense gun reform I mean the reason that Dylan Roof was able to get a gun is because after 72 hours if the federal government the FBI doesn't come back with the background check then the owner of that store can sell you a gun regardless. We refer to it as the Charleston loophole. The background check wasn't complete it was a complete background check. Dylan Roof wouldn't have got the gun that he used to kill nine people. And so you know universal background checks all of those things are important. But in the south there is a. And it cuts across races and it cuts across economic backgrounds. There is a proclivity to have gun ownership.

**Axelrod:** [00:35:17] Because there's a fear though. I mean universal background checks are not the law of the land. Even though 90 percent of Americans say they support it because the NRA opposes it and they oppose it because they know.

**Sellers:** [00:35:29] The most powerful lobby in the history of this country.

**Axelrod:** [00:35:32] And they don't allow for any breach in that because they say it's a slippery slope and it'll open the door to other things. And that's a majority view where you come from.

**Sellers:** [00:35:44] Well you know we've had we've had some very serious instances of shootings on campuses and in high schools. Back when my father was on the state Department of Education one of the first school shootings we had in this country was at Blackville Hill to high school. And so we've had these instances and as a legislator what I wanted to do is represent my constituents No. No question. But I also wanted to have some progressive gun reform and progressive issues that I was able to hang my hat on.

**Axelrod:** [00:36:14] Do you think we can overcome this. Just to put a button on this gun is there a way to find common ground on this or is it just you know possible.

**Sellers:** [00:36:23] I think I mean listen to be as blunt. As I always am and even sometimes on CNN you read me back in. But if 20 plus little white kids can be gunned down in an elementary school and we don't fix the gun laws in this country we're not going to do it now.

**Axelrod:** [00:36:44] Talk to me about your work your other work as a legislator and the things that you were proudest of doing.

**Sellers:** [00:36:54] My proudest moment is something that's not really sexy. I went and got seven hundred thousand dollars from our state budget and we built a library in Denmark South Carolina and people like you know building a library. The reason that it was so amazing is because you have a great deal of poverty. People don't think about the other gaps and divides that you have. So in my community we have a huge technological divide. And so that's now where people go to apply for jobs send and receive basic e-mails. They do some afterschool programs and they are just so kids have resources. Some are programs in there. And so for me it was just just a small way that I could put my district into the 21st century. On my watch because we didn't expand Medicaid and some other things my hospital closed down. I was in Time magazine and People magazine ironically enough in the same week. The reason I was in People magazine is because they were profiling schools that were still falling apart. This was in 2010 and they profiled a school that was a mile from my house the day before the photographer

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went in the cafeteria roof collapsed and it's not something that makes a CNN ticker or MSNBC ticker or anything else because that's the typical condition of schools in my area and so I was attempting to highlight all of these things and be a voice for so many people who whose voices went on hurt. But having legislative successes again being a Dem in the south is know far and few between.

**Axelrod:** [00:38:21] And yet you were able to get the 700000 and presumably get that that school repaired.

**Sellers:** [00:38:28] And we got that we thanks to build America bonds and you guys in Washington D.C.. Yes. We were able to. We were able to get those schools built.

**Axelrod:** [00:38:40] We're here. You're here as a fellow at the Institute of Politics at the University of Chicago for which I'm really really grateful. You know part of what I struggle with is that young people are very. Interested today in changing the world but they're pretty skeptical about whether politics is the way to do it. After your experience you spent six years eight eight years in the legislature. Yes. How I spent my 20s I think you do. You refer to it. What do you tell people who say you know what I see the spectacle and I just don't think that's the best way to make things happen.

**Sellers:** [00:39:27] Well I tell people you can make things happen in two ways either be inside the system outside the system and you know I have friends like DeRay and others who are saying black lives matter and so DeRay McKesson who they push the status quo from the outside. You have a lot of my friends who are Bernie Sanders supporters who want to push the system from the outside.

**Axelrod:** [00:39:45] You are not a Bernie Sanders supporter.

**Sellers:** [00:39:46] I was not a Sanders supporter. I was a Hillary Clinton supporter and I was very thankful I made the right choice and a Barack Obama supporter early supporter. But I appreciated my role inside the system and I tell people Look don't wait. We need more get people involved. I was doing office hours recently here at the University of Chicago and told a young man that you know go home. And as soon as you graduate run for office we need you. And I'm very encouraging people to run from dogcatcher on up because we need more talented people.

**Axelrod:** [00:40:17] You know you've made an impact not just as a elected official but also as a as a lawyer. And there were some battles you fought one for for black farmers.

**Sellers:** [00:40:32] Yes.

**Axelrod:** [00:40:33] Talk a little bit about that.

**Sellers:** [00:40:35] I was a young lawyer baby lawyer working with some amazing people and we filed a lawsuit on behalf of black farmers throughout the South against the U.S. Department of Agriculture. And the reason we did it is because they had a pattern of discriminating when it came to farm loans. And so we were very successful. We settled that case for one point to one point three billion dollars. That was probably my second proudest moment my proudest moment

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as a lawyer has been that I successfully sued the state of South Carolina and the Supreme Court. Now I got a chance to argue in front of our Supreme Court ruled that domestic violence laws were unconstitutional because they didn't cover same sex couples. And so I don't know I just that's the type of stuff that gets me going. You know being able to you know change the world in whatever field im doing.

**Axelrod:** [00:41:23] You ran for lieutenant governor in 2014. Some people would argue just on the face of it lieutenant governor isn't the best place from which to change the world. But you are and then the less and you are what thirty eight years in the legislature. Why. Why lieutenant governor and. And what prospects did you think you had running statewide in South Carolina.

**Sellers:** [00:41:48] I thought it was going to win. That it was going make history. We had had an African-American elected statewide in South Carolina since Reconstruction. And so and I was thinking about this the other day although I wasn't the one who was able to shatter that ceiling. I'm really glad it was somebody like Tim Scott who I have a great deal of respect for who is now the first African-American elected statewide in South Carolina since Reconstruction ran as a republic ran as a Republican. And you know I got 500 and 5 votes. We raised nearly a million dollars I went to all 46 counties in South Carolina. Got to meet amazing people I know where every single Zaxby's is the state of South Carolina. And it's an experience that I cherish. But I also know that. When I run for office again I will only run for one of two seats or two seats that would be United States Congress or governor of South Carolina. I don't really have any interest in running for attorney general or lieutenant governor or a state senator or anything of that sort.

**Axelrod:** [00:42:50] I notice you said when not if. We're going to take a short break and we'll be right back with Bakari Sellers.

**Axelrod:** [00:43:05] You have experienced the continuing struggles relative to race particularly in South but all over the country one of them has to do with voter registration. Talk about the state of play there and are we moving backward or forward in terms of voting rights in this kind.

**Sellers:** [00:43:32] Oh we're moving backwards. There's there's no question about it. If you look at someone like a Rick Scott or Governor Scott Walker in Wisconsin and you look at what they're doing the purging of the Rolls voter ID bills I mean restricting absentee ballots are how one can actually request or process an absentee ballot. All under the name of some security voter security or sanctity of the ballot when we don't have these issues in our country they just fundamentally making it more and more difficult for people to be a part of the process. I believe there were 200000 plus people in Wisconsin who were kicked off the rolls and purged prior to this recent election in 2016. I don't want to say that would change the outcome but that probably would change the outcome of the race. Well 27000 votes was the margin I think it's constant in the presidential race. Correct. And so you know when you when you think about this we're taking you know and in my perspective I know the price that was paid for individuals to have access to the ballot box and it's very troubling because you have organizations we thought when we talking about guns you mentioned the NRA but when we're talking about these pieces of legislation we have to talk about Alec and groups that conservative think tank groups that push forth these these bills which take our country backwards.

**Axelrod:** [00:44:54] Why aren't there significant. Now I know I'm going to get notes from people who talk about their organizations but why was the Republican Party so much more effective at

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these kinds of efforts. Is it because of funding. Is it because I mean there seems to be more at the grass roots.

**Sellers:** [00:45:16] We have rich Democrats too. So I mean I know that people talk about that.

**Axelrod:** [00:45:19] Are they investing their money wrong.

**Sellers:** [00:45:21] Maybe but I think that it's something totally different. I think that the Republican Party is more of a grassroots-based group an organization I think.

**Axelrod:** [00:45:32] But why should that be.

**Sellers:** [00:45:33] I don't I don't think it should be. I think Democrats though we are we are a cult of personality. And I think that we've seen that expression at the top of the ticket outside of maybe Jimmy Carter but JFK Bill Clinton. Barack Obama. Our party always has the most success when there is a personality or a figure that drives the topic in the discussion. The Republican Party is completely inverse or has been in so that.

**Axelrod:** [00:45:59] They certainly have a guy who drives the topic of discussion now they don't.

**Sellers:** [00:46:04] That's a whole another discussion.

**Axelrod:** [00:46:06] What about Hillary. I know you're very very close to her. And let's stipulate the sort of extraordinary circumstances relative to the Russians relative to coming and so on. But when you listed the cult of personality candidates she was not among them.

**Sellers:** [00:46:24] No I think that Hillary Clinton would have been and I say this sitting across the table from you. But I think Hillary Clinton would have been the best governing president this country has ever seen. I think that she was arguably one of a candidate who had the most difficulty campaigning. I think that she will even tell you that she didn't believe herself to be the best candidate in the world. And you know what that is because people have a number of thoughts. You can't take away all of the external factors the sexism et cetera et cetera. But I was very proud to support her. And I felt as if we had an amazing opportunity in this country to break that gap glass ceiling. And for me it's again personal because I was 12 year old daughter who you know wants to be president of United States one day. But it's kind of hard to be say you want to be president when you haven't seen anybody who looks like you be president.

**Axelrod:** [00:47:25] Well that and that of course was one of the powers of one of the one of the great legacies of Barack Obama is that there are millions of people in this country who can say that but we still haven't broken that other barrier.

**Sellers:** [00:47:39] I mean my favorite picture of Barack Obama is not one with you in it. DAVID But it's with four year old Jacob Philadelphi yes. And you know when he when Jacob was able to ask the president any question Does your hair feel like mine and Barack Obama leaned over the incomparable Pete Souza took that picture. It was that for me.

**Axelrod:** [00:48:04] It said everything didn't it.

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**Sellers:** [00:48:05] That was it was the most powerful image that I had that Obama eight years.

**Axelrod:** [00:48:11] We have had this after Charlottesville and the events there. There was this debate that erupted over statues and whether or not Confederate statue should occupy positions of of Honor given what the Confederacy represented as someone who comes from the south. Is that a productive debate and how should public officials handle that debate.

**Sellers:** [00:48:41] I think that one of the people who look forward to getting to know more when they run for president the United States actually handled this debate better than anybody. Mayor Mitch Landrieu from New Orleans. He gave one of the better speeches I've heard and the like. It was a great speech. A long time. Personally I think Jimmy Carter is wrong. I think they should all come down. I. I do think that people say well why you don't get bogged down in this debate. Well I think I can walk and chew bubble gum at the same time. So I think I can have this debate and other debates as well. It's very hard when I'm having this discussion with people and they're like well you know you even have to educate people on why the Civil War was fought and they say well this was about states rights. This was about an economy and I say well what was the currency of that economy. You know our country you know had two original sins genocide of Native Americans and slavery. And we've never really dealt with either one of those things. You know other countries don't necessarily have statues to memorialize and celebrate. Individuals who perpetrated slavery in their country and so for me take them all down. I don't want a plaque trying to clarify what the history is. We have a we have a statue of John C. Calhoun and Pitchfork Tillman and Pitchfork Ben Tillman. Pitchfork Ben Tillman would have burned the Capitol down if he knew I was serving in it. So there is there's no clarifying that there is.

**Axelrod:** [00:50:18] You walked in the other day when Ta-Nehisi Coates who was here and.

**Sellers:** [00:50:24] Our generation's James Baldwin.

**Axelrod:** [00:50:26] Yes and if you read his powerful powerful stuff and his really Seage s account of history pretty hard not to be absolutely clear on what what that war was about what the Confederacy was about and yet still strong cultural ties to it.

**Sellers:** [00:50:50] We mean. My first time really delving into the issue of the Confederacy was when I was 15 years old and my father and I got on a march from Charleston South Carolina to Columbia South Carolina with Darius Rucker and Mayor Joe Riley and others to take the flag down. And if you would I don't know if you were there. I know you watched it but I don't know if you were actually in Colombia that day when it came down for the last time I know you had people literally crying all age groups because I don't think people understood stood how stifling that symbol of oppression could be and to have these reminders around you all the time that are called Confederate monuments in South Carolina. Post Brown vs. the Board of Education in white flight like you had in many places in the south. We had this this independent school system and so like a lot of these schools are named Andrew Jackson Robert Lee Academy Jefferson Davis Academy places that I wouldn't go to school at. And so it's hard to have those images around you all the time but it's a part of the Southern culture and I'm a NASCAR fan too. That is capital race before I've not been to a NASCAR race. You because you have an invite and you're coming to Darlington with me. All right. It's nothing like that experience. If you can get past looking at all the confederate flags.

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**Axelrod:** [00:52:13] I will watch the race But tell me what as you watch Donald Trump he obviously has really mind that faultline in American politics. And my guess is probably still quite popular among his base in South Carolina. His numbers in these Southern states has been very high. So there's been profit for him in trying to. In trying to mine all of that.

**Sellers:** [00:52:48] You know.

**Axelrod:** [00:52:50] Not for the country necessarily.

**Sellers:** [00:52:52] Donald Trump has utilized race as a valuable currency in politics and racism. You've always remember I'll never forget this I taught my father about it. You pulled me aside one day and cautioned me about labeling people racist on TV. And yet your admonition or instruction was that sometimes people are not racist but they utilize racism.

**Axelrod:** [00:53:18] Right. And that doesn't make it any better the way in certain ways. There's a sinister cynicism that makes it worse.

**Sellers:** [00:53:25] There is a calculation. Yeah. And so I struggled with that for a long time in my critique of Donald Trump. However Donald Trump has enveloped himself in. Some of the more racist figures that we've seen in American politics. I mean Steve Bannon held the job that you held. I mean that is kind of where we were and that's where we were or where we are as a country. Steven Miller for example who has ideologies that I really just find completely repulsive. When you envelop your your self with those types of individuals and then you speak. You don't even try to speak in these racial undertones you use a bullhorn when he went down to Alabama. Alabama of all places and called NFL players protesting majority of which are African. The overwhelming majority of which are African-American sons of bitches then. That to me rang very very loudly. And so.

**Axelrod:** [00:54:26] It's apropos to nothing because Colin Kaepernick hadn't even been in the league for quite a while.

**Sellers:** [00:54:31] It was random.

**Axelrod:** [00:54:32] I mean it was it wasn't random in that there was a method to it but it was not based on anything that was happening. In fact the protests became much more significant after the president did what he did.

**Sellers:** [00:54:46] So I do think that the Donald Trump uses white supremacy I do think that he uses racism. You know I'll let the history books right. Whether or not Donald Trump is a racist. I've only met him once.

**Axelrod:** [00:55:00] Yeah. The impact though is is pretty clear.

**Sellers:** [00:55:05] I think the title is irrelevant.

**Axelrod:** [00:55:07] Yeah I got to ask you one thing that interests me about your story is you are lil lil known but you're a big proponent of Israel and you're very close to a PAC. The

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American Israel Public Affairs Committee which is kind of the I know they are not a lobbying organization. They're political affairs. Yes but they're a very powerful. They are on Capitol Hill and very close to the government of Israel. Very. And you got into a debate during the Democratic convention of 2016 about whether to remove language that referred to Israelis Israel's presence in these territories as occupied Palestinian territories. Talk to me about that.

**Sellers:** [00:56:06] That was a loaded question. So my support for Israel has been one that dates back to my years in college when I was a student government president at Morehouse and began a PAC invited me up and begin to bring me to their conferences and I've been able to go to Israel. I actually count Ron Dermer as a friend of mine the Israeli ambassador and now Israeli ambassador to the U.S.. And so I've watched our foreign policy as it relates to Israel and Palestine and Israel and Iran and Israel and Syria and Lebanon all of its border countries with great interest. And for me more than being a supporter of the state of Israel it was a learning journey. You know I tell people all the time in order to understand Israel as you've been you kind of have to go around and you know I've been in Palestine I've been to Bethlehem. I've been on Gaza West Bank been to the border of Lebanon and Syria and I just felt as if there is a country that maintains the values that we hold near and true. You know you can be gay in Israel and prosper you can be a woman and be empowered in Israel. You can be a Somalian immigrant and have a have a amazing life but that doesn't mean that my support is you know unfettered. I think that one of the reasons that we haven't had the progress that we want between the Israelis and Palestinians is because Bibi Netanyahu. I think that a lot of the clashes that we saw in the last administration between Barack Obama and Bibi Netanyahu were very personality driven. And so you just had two men who I felt looked at each other in different ways. And I felt as if the prime minister actually disrespected the forty fourth president the United States on a number of occasions. And with that he you know Ron Dermer who you can as a friend was was a part of that and bringing him here in the midst of the debate on the Iran agreement was provocative and I thought it was provocative and I thought it was disrespectful and you know because of my support my position I'm able to say that and have an audience and people who respond because if we're going to continue to build coalitions around having a safe and secure Israel with young people young millennial young people of color then we're going to have to make sure that we can actually message and it was very hard during that time period for me to have any positive interaction with people about what was going on in our country as it relates to Israel. When Bibi Netanyahu was embarrassing the president with that being said though I also get to tout the fact that in the last eight years of Barack Obama the relationship has never been any stronger in terms of military assistance is 31 billion dollars and you f 35 than the iron dome.

**Axelrod:** [00:59:03] I mean you tout that it's a little more ambiguous when Prime Minister Netanyahu accounts for it. Look I'm a son of a Jewish immigrant Jewish refugees so I have you know I have very strong feelings about Israel. And one of them is that I applaud all the values that you talk about but I worry about Israel's ability to continue as a Jewish democratic state and hold these territories and hold you know and have the relationship with the Palestinians that they do now. So it's a thorny issue. Security is obviously a huge concern. But at the end of the day you know my view is that one has to acknowledge that there needs to be an answer and building more and more settlements are not the answer.

**Sellers:** [00:59:55] I think that the White House took a legitimate position when they said that you should not build any more it is hard to negotiate any land swaps when you when you have.

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**Axelrod:** [01:00:03] Which I think is the idea frankly.

**Sellers:** [01:00:05] Yes. So you know and just so people get a clear view of everything. I mean. The Palestinian government over 51 percent of them are comprised of Hamas right now. So it's very difficult to have conversations about negotiating anything when you have a group in power that doesn't believe you have the right to exist. And so I know one thing that I don't have the audacity to believe that I can figure this out by myself and I don't believe Jared Kushner can.

**Axelrod:** [01:00:38] Yeah well listen I I just found it's intriguing and I actually I applaud you for taking an interest in that issue. But you know and I agree with you and your assessment of the leadership I think that there needs to be a different attitude on the part of the Israeli leadership as well as the Palestinian leadership. If that problem is going to get solved. Well because it's been a treat to have you not just here but at the Institute of Politics. One way to inspire young people to consider a path in politics is to invite a guy who is barely older than they are and has been eight years in the South Carolina legislature and has made as much of a difference as you've made so I appreciate you being here both on this podcast and at the Institute.

**Sellers:** [01:01:37] Thank you so much for this opportunity.

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