

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO INSTITUTE OF POLITICS & CNN PRESENT

THE AXE FILES

The Axe Files - Ep. 190: Christiane Amanpour

Released November 13, 2017

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

David Axelrod: [00:00:15] She's one of the great trailblazing broadcast journalists of our time. And it's clear to see why, when you listen to Christiane Amanpour's story. I sat down with her in London last week. Here's that conversation.

David Axelrod: [00:00:29] Christiane Amanpour you are one of the world's great storytellers. But now I want to hear yours because it's a great story in and of itself. Tell me about your growing up here in England where we're visiting with you and in Iran.

Christiane Amanpour: [00:00:47] Yes, so I was born in England. My mother is English. My father was Iranian. And they met on a really romantic adventurous journey that I, you know, only had learned about way later. My mom drove a car-a brand new car-for clients of her father who wanted to go to Tehran and she drove them. She was 21 years old or younger. In 1956 or around there, I mean, young British women didn't do that kind of stuff so she was a real adventurer. And she drove over there through the badlands of, you know, the Turkish sort of mountains and across to the border having gone through France and got on a boat, and you know, Lebanon, the whole lot and finally ends up in Tehran where she then goes to a party and meets my dad who's a confirmed bachelor, 20 years older than her, and they fall in love. And then he chases her all the way back to London and asked for my my mum's hand in marriage from my grandfather who said to him "sir, you seem to be closer in age to me than to my daughter." Anyway, so they got married, they had us. I was born in England and immediately, you know, taken over to Iran where I grew up. For me, my first home was Iran and all I can remember, all these years later, I remember everything but in terms of- just happiness. I was really happy. I had a fantastic childhood. We weren't rich, we weren't poor.

David Axelrod: [00:02:27] And what did your folks do?

Christiane Amanpour: [00:02:27] He ran a travel agency, but my father was connected to all the top movers and shakers in Iran. It's a very, very small community. They all went to the same school and he was close to members of the royal family, close to many people who moved and shook the place around which is relevant when it comes to the revolution when I'm 20 years old.

David Axelrod: [00:02:50] The Shah was in.

Christiane Amanpour: [00:02:50] The Shah was in power. My mom was a stay at home mom, looked after us, raised us. And life was really great and it was very special. I was able to do sports, I went to school, had friends, did all the kind of things that kids used to do before social media and barely television. I mean, you know, we were allowed to watch only a little television. And I had a fantastic childhood and I had a rock solid childhood. And the reason I'm saying that now is because I realise how much your childhood affects your whole life; how much what you [00:03:27] experienced [0.8] then; how your parents treated you; how if you grew up in a secure and loving environment what it does for you for the rest of your life. And I hadn't realised what a debt of gratitude I owe my parents for just being great parents; for being there and for loving us

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO INSTITUTE OF POLITICS & CNN PRESENT

THE AXE FILES

and for never ever ever asking; me telling me; expecting me to follow their path or to do what they thought for me.

David Axelrod: [00:03:56] Well the story you told about your mother helps explain your intrepid nature as a journalist. She would well approve of that I assume.

Christiane Amanpour: [00:04:06] I think so. And, you know, my mother and my father I think they must have been worried when I went to war zones; when I spent so long under, you know, these bombardments and sniping and, you know, dreadful genocides and real refugee crises- all these things- they must've been really really worried but I know that they never expressed that. They obviously always asked what was going on but they never tried to say "oh come back or don't or were afraid for you." Never. And again it's only afterwards that you realise how empowering and liberating that is because you don't- you're not doing your job thinking oh my goodness everybody at home is terrified; oh my goodness I've got to get out of here; oh my goodness there's the pressure. And I wasn't married; I didn't have a kid for all the years that I was doing that what I call balls to the wall reporting in the war zones. And so that was very important for me and I think that had I been more of a domesticated animal back then I might not have done what I did; I would have felt I had a responsibility to stay alive.

David Axelrod: [00:05:10] I think you're, I think you're so right about people's childhood- you know, I always start off these conversations by asking people about how they grew up because it is formative and often times people have struggles that, for better and worse, formulate their personalities.

Christiane Amanpour: [00:05:33] I've seen so many people and I've heard so many friends or, you know, read about so many accomplished people who in all of their life stories- or in many of them- hark back to, it was never enough for my dad or it was never enough for my mum or the opposite. So you're absolutely right that those early formative years and those experiences and the messages you get from your parents are absolutely critical. And I would just say one other thing given that we live now in an environment; in a civilisation moment where, you know, foreigners, refugees, immigration, tribalism, religious extremism- all of that informs our civilisation right now, whether it's in the United States under the current administration or in Europe since the refugee crisis or around the rest of the world. I was so fortunate to grow up with an English Catholic mother and Iranian Muslim father who, without ever saying anything about this, taught me just from being there that it's possible to coexist; that it's absolutely fine to know and understand and absorb the story of the other; that as a woman there is nothing denied to you as a young girl. You can do anything. That's what I learnt from my parents without them ever actually saying it.

David Axelrod: [00:06:57] What about around you and how were you greeted both in Iran and in Britain?

Christiane Amanpour: [00:07:08] Well certainly since I've been going back to Iran after the revolution; when I grew up and got a career and worked for CNN, I went back to Iran several- many, many times. I covered the unfolding revolution there. And, you know, I get mixed reactions there. I get people who, you know, swarm me and are happy that I'm an Iranian. "Oh you're giving us a good name overseas and well done and thanks for showing the world that not all Iranians are rag-head terrorists." And others, you know the more hard liners, should we say,

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO INSTITUTE OF POLITICS & CNN PRESENT

THE AXE FILES

deeply suspicious. "What is she doing coming back? What is her power on CNN?" This and that. But, in general, I've had a very good ability to cut through that stuff and to get to the heart of the matter; to be able to tell the stories there on a human street level and to be able to get access to the top power. I've interviewed all the presidents- every single one of them- since 1995, I think. From Rafsanjani all the way to the current President Rouhani. So I've done the hard liners, I've done the moderates and the reformers. And that's been really interesting, as well, because- what's weird for me to think about is that I grew up in the country. For me, it was just home, that in 1979 exploded onto the world with this Islamic revolution- the first in modern history.

David Axelrod: [00:08:36] You were not there-

Christiane Amanpour: [00:08:37] I was there. I absolutely was there.

David Axelrod: [00:08:38] So describe that.

Christiane Amanpour: [00:08:40] Yeah. Well, I was there because I was wandering around in the wilderness. I had gone through 12th grade- we call it upper sixth here in England. I had failed my exams; I had not got good enough grades to do what I thought I wanted to do- which I thought maybe was the right thing to do- to be a doctor. I really thought I wanted to be a doctor. And I was actually quite good at science, but I- very good at science in fact- but I changed schools at the critical 11th grade into a school that didn't teach science properly. You know, they were much more liberal arts and art and this and that. Anyways, so I failed. What can I tell you. Or, I didn't get good enough grades to go. So, you can imagine that that can either, you know, destroy you or it can focus you and you can try to move past and learn. At the time you didn't understand that it was- failing was a learning experience.

David Axelrod: [00:09:27] I'm guessing you took door two.

David Axelrod: [00:09:30] I took door two by dint of what happened to me and my family and my country. It was the Iranian revolution, which because I was wandering around in the wilderness trying to figure out what to do so I was at home in Iran, when it all started in the beginning of 1978. So I was there- you know, suddenly there's martial law on the streets outside my door. Suddenly, you know, you're sitting on your veranda and you're listening to these smuggled in audiotapes of Ayatollah Khomeini- the booming around in that sonorous, scary Islamic way around the, you know, threatening who knew what. And we were terrified; we did not know what was going to happen. And my mom, you know, who was very respectful; always modestly dressed- but we never had to wear hijabs or chadors or all that kind of stuff when we were growing up- and my mom, you know, would go to the shop or go to the bazaar and all of a sudden my mother, who may have had a bare arm, found herself spat on. And my dad, who was connected with everybody who was anybody from the Shah on down, was suddenly afraid. My uncle was suddenly arrested. I mean he- we believe.

David Axelrod: [00:10:45] And ultimately was executed.

Christiane Amanpour: [00:10:46] We believe that. They never gave us the body. Never. And we believe that somehow was either physically killed or- under duress of torture, illness or whatever it is- died but we don't know because they never gave us the body back. And so to

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO INSTITUTE OF POLITICS & CNN PRESENT

THE AXE FILES

see your world turned upside down like that, for me, I was old enough to be fascinated. I was old enough to be just amazed by what was happening around me and to decide in that moment that I wanted to tell those stories to the world. And I thought, oh, well, that's journalism. And oh, I think I want to do television because I'd heard of Barbara Walters. And I think I want to go to America because that's the place to go if you have a dream; if you want to work hard; if you want to make your career, your life; if you have to leave your own land. And that's what I did.

David Axelrod: [00:11:46] So this is in the bubble box that you were thinking but, in the moment, what does your family do?

Christiane Amanpour: [00:11:54] So my family had to stay. They stayed throughout the revolution because- here's the thing- my family didn't have wealth outside. So what were they going to do? They didn't have a house in the south of France or wherever it was. Many, many of their friends did. They were much wealthier. They came out. They had- they lost a lot in Iran- but they had some things to fall back on. So my parents stayed and didn't come out until the summer of 1980- so that is a year and a half after Ayatollah Khomeini comes back. And they came out for their annual summer break where they came to England stayed with my grandparents. And I had three sisters and two of the very youngest ones were still in school in Iran. So they saw their textbooks having pages ripped out so history was being obliterated at some points, the school being closed so teachers would have to create sort of underground schools in their homes, much like under the Taliban in Afghanistan. And my sisters would go to these schools, you know, they were I don't know, whatever, 7, 10. And, anyway, parents came out with them for a summer holiday and, boom, as they were going back to Iran, again, because they didn't have an option, the Iran-Iraq war broke out in September of 1980 and they didn't go back. And the reason they didn't go back was the borders were all closed; you couldn't drive back, couldn't fly back, you couldn't get back into Iran. And because of my father's connections- even though he was never a minister or, you know, a rich guy or whatever, but he had connections to all these people- he was advised that the longer he stayed out the less safe it was for him to return. And because his brother had been imprisoned and what happened to him, etc., he didn't go back. So my parents lived a life of refugee immigrants and stayed in England. Of course, my mother was English and my grandparents were around and they were very helpful, and that was good. And that's what happened.

David Axelrod: [00:13:51] How do you- how did that shape your future reporting? Because we now have a planet full of refugees- refugees from war, refugees from climate change. I mean, it is, you know, with six million refugees.

Christiane Amanpour: [00:14:11] There are 36 million all over the world- the highest number since World War II. Crazy.

David Axelrod: [00:14:17] So how does your experience shape your- both your reporting and, you know, I would have to call it activism, if journalists can be called activists?

Christiane Amanpour: [00:14:33] You know, I used to shy away from that very very very very much. I'm not an activist. I'm not a politician. I'm not an ideologue. All I want is to tell people stories. But, after 30 years, by dint of telling stories stories, you become a de facto activist right?

David Axelrod: [00:14:51] Telling stories is a form of activism, absolutely.

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO INSTITUTE OF POLITICS & CNN PRESENT

THE AXE FILES

Christiane Amanpour: [00:14:51] Right. So I'm an activist for the truth. I'm actually an activist for humanity. That's what I have become because of what I did. That's all just because of where I was at that particular time seeing those things, telling those stories. And I am obviously incredibly sensitive to refugees and immigrants. I just cannot get over- and it really almost makes me cry every time I even think about it- the number of people who, through no fault of their own, have been forced out of their homes, who have gone from having great jobs, who've gone from being you know doctors, academics, engineers, scientists, whatever, business people and end up in a tent in some runt of a desert in some, you know, backyard of a people who don't want them and they are treated like the worst of the worst; like they have no rights; like they are not people; like they have no humanity. And it's really- I fear for people, I fear for society when I think of the way people look at refugees today. I really do. I fear for our humanity. I fear for our ability to be, you know, a global society as a community and look at what's happening with the Rohingya in Bangladesh right now. So I have always tried to report accurately and fairly on refugees. I've always tried to tell their stories whenever it's possible, whether- I mean, I remember being in Rwanda in the early 90s. You know, in three months the Hutus created a genocide that was even faster than what the Nazis did in the gas chambers. In three months they killed nearly a million people just because they were Tutsis and with prehistoric you know knives and clubs. It wasn't gas chambers. It wasn't industrial. That's what people can do to each other. And all of a sudden hundreds of thousands of them had to flee when they were chased out when this genocide was finally ended. And I remember going and reporting on them and seeing them die on mass and their bodies stacked up like like cords of wood because of cholera and this and that. And then several years later, literally I'll never forget this, standing on the border between Rwanda and Zaire- now Democratic Republic of Congo- and watching more than a million refugees come home. There were no foghorns or bullhorns. There was no instruction. There was no politicians no leaders. Somehow, out of nowhere, this message went to all these refugee camps and in silence people got up- it was a sea of humanity- and walked from their refugee camps back home and we followed them. The silence is what really still gets me. I just can't even imagine how that many people could do that. So the pull of home is so strong. And what people don't understand in the West is that these refugees don't want necessarily to be in your lands. They want to go home. I took my son who is now 17 and half. He's in 12th grade. I took him to the refugee camps in Jordan last year when he was 16. And there are millions of Syrians there who've who've rotated through those camps. And I taught my son to meet refugees his own age so that he could see what was going on. He could see that they were all people just like him. He met a young boy called Mohammed who became the man of his family because Mohammed had seen his own father killed in Syria; shot. And his mom and his two other sisters and he fled. And he's now the man of the family. My son at 16, who we do everything for, saw how this young boy 16 was doing everything for his mom; his sisters.

David Axelrod: [00:18:57] How did that affect your son?

Christiane Amanpour: [00:18:59] It impacted him very deeply. I was really touched by his compassion; by his curiosity; by his commitment. And to this day, you know, he volunteered in the summer at a refugee agency here in London. He is part of his school's international affairs club and he's invited one of the leading experts on refugees here at Oxford University to speak there. And so just to say that it's important to know who the who these people are- and that's all we can do is storytellers. That's all we can do as parents- you know teach our children well.

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO INSTITUTE OF POLITICS & CNN PRESENT

THE AXE FILES

David Axelrod: [00:19:36] Yeah, you know, I think in our politics and it may be a function of the modern media world; it may be a function of this rapid change and so on, but more and more we dehumanize each other and our stories get lost and what takes its place are caricatures that are really really dangerous.

Christiane Amanpour: [00:19:57] Absolutely.

David Axelrod: [00:20:01] We've got to take a short break. We'll be right back with Christiane Amanpour.

David Axelrod: [00:20:35] So you went to the states, just to pick up your story, you went to University of Rhode Island.

Christiane Amanpour: [00:20:41] I did. I did. And I loved it.

David Axelrod: [00:20:43] What made you choose that? Well, so, I went to the states not having any, you know, contacts or anything and knowing that a whole group of my Iranian friends who had been in high school in various parts of America were going to Brown or Boston University or New York or- they were all sort of East Coasters- and I thought, well, I'm going to go there too; I don't know anybody else anywhere else. But I didn't have the money; my parents couldn't get any money out of Iran. So I didn't have the money to go to an Ivy League. I'd done my SATs. I did pretty well. And luckily somebody helped me get into the University of Rhode Island. And I just went there.

David Axelrod: [00:21:21] They had a journalist program.

Christiane Amanpour: [00:21:22] They had a journalism school which was great. So I loved it. I'm still very committed. I support their Harington School of Communications now and actually I even sponsor a lecture there every year so that international experts can come and talk to the students whether they're journalists or people, you know, who have a global outlook on the world. The latest one was the head of Reuters, Steve Adla. Yeah, I was very very pleased. Anyway so I went there and loved it, commuted off campus to Providence, the capital of the state of Rhode Island. I consider Rhode Island my home state away from home. And I made great friends and I couldn't have had a better experience. I adored my U.S. university experience.

David Axelrod: [00:22:05] One of the people who was a friend of yours in that time was John F. Kennedy Jr. You were a housemate of his. He was at Brown. How- and you were close and you remained close throughout his life.

Christiane Amanpour: [00:22:23] So, as things are, I was at a party at university at that time and he was at a party and he was part of the group of friends of my friends- anyway, we met and we became friends. And when he wanted to live off campus, he asked me and a group of other people to share a house with him. So we did. We were five altogether. And it was great fun. I mean John was an amazing person. And of course, you being in Democratic politics, you know the power of the Kennedy name, and the power of aspiration and hope that that family

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO INSTITUTE OF POLITICS & CNN PRESENT

THE AXE FILES

gives to the world. Even when I was in Iran, we had a Kennedy Boulevard. Every country I went to had a Kennedy Avenue or this or that. It was really inspiring for the whole world.

David Axelrod: [00:23:11] I was inspired to politics as a little boy by John F. Kennedy. But, you know, I also am friendly with Caroline Kennedy- splendid person. But, through friendship, I've also come to recognize the burdens that are associated with that, and just, you know, the sort of withering expectations of that legacy and I'm sure he must have felt that too.

Christiane Amanpour: [00:23:42] He must have. He was very good at compartmentalizing. You know, if anybody tried to pin him down on a future career in politics, he would brush it away. He wouldn't play their game. Not even to be polite. He was never impolite. This is what I hope people- I want people to know about John. He was immensely gracious. He was immensely fun. He was a beautiful boy. He was a beautiful character. He had a beautiful heart. And he also was a serious guy. You know he created a speakers bureau at Brown and it was the first time I ever met, for instance, a leading anti-apartheid activist, Helen Suzman, the white Jewish MP who was a leading anti-apartheid activist. And, you know, John brought these people, and then, you know, people at the time- it was the 80s so it was nuclear war, you know, we were going to get blown up. And so there was the pros and cons on the arms control and all the rest of it, anti-nukes. So he was from a young age, just to say, or a formative age, devoted to serious things as well as to being a college student with all the fun and the sports and the girlfriends and the drinking and all the fun that we all had so he was a really normal rounded person. Having said that, with abnormal expectations on him, with an abnormal life really, to have lost his father so young, and yet couldn't ever escape the image of his father or the pressures that that would bring, but I never saw it as pressure because John was immensely proud of his family, obviously and all the good things that they had done for America and for the rest of the world. And I think he was equally lucid about maybe one or two characters who hadn't burnished the family name so so glitteringly. John's mother was an amazing person. I had the opportunity to get to know, through John, Jackie. And, you know, I never- it's the family omertà- you never talk about them when they were alive I never talked about John. I never talked about Jackie. But I will say that she was an incredible person. She was an incredible mentor to me and she was an amazing mother and I will always remember her face lighting up whenever she saw John just like "Oh angel." I remember going to his apartment in New York. We banged on the door and his mom answered the door. I mean, just, she was just an ordinary, loving mother- well, not ordinary, obviously- but it was, you know, it was great.

David Axelrod: [00:26:18] Yeah. I mean, one has to assume that, just knowing- well, I know Caroline, you know them both- but to have navigated those kids through. I mean, all of America, you know, has the images of them as 5 and 3 year old children frozen in there consciousness.

Christiane Amanpour: [00:26:41] And then I think that that was a challenge- you're absolutely right- to break out of those images that the whole world had and to be their own people and to stick with that no matter where it took them, whether it was into the limelight or not. And I think that was really important. And I know Caroline- along with Senator Teddy Kennedy- played a pivotal role in President Obama's campaign. And I wonder- I don't claim to have been told the secret of whether John would have pursued elected politics- I think he would have done. I don't know. But I think he would have been fantastic. He was so charismatic and so compassionate and a real person and believed in, you know, the kinds of things that motivate all of us. And, yeah, I think he would have been very good and I think George magazine-

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO INSTITUTE OF POLITICS & CNN PRESENT

THE AXE FILES

David Axelrod: [00:27:34] The magazine he founded.

Christiane Amanpour: [00:27:34] -when I look back on it. The magazine he founded, exactly, which was his first public breakout, really. I think it was, maybe he didn't know it- I certainly don't know it, I can't say for sure- but you know that was his soft entree into politics in his own way where he fused celebrity politics and real issues you know and sort of- which is what we're all doing today right. I mean, that's what's happened- this whole sort of fusion. But anyway I remember- just one thing about his mother, which I never heard her say, but she said it in some place that it was written down for all immortality and I think she's absolutely right, if you screw up your children, nothing else much matters. If you screw up raising- she obviously didn't say screw up- if you mess up raising your children, nothing else you do in life much matters. And I think that is that is absolutely a motto to live by.

David Axelrod: [00:28:27] You've seen a lot of, sadly, a lot of death, a lot of loss in your life- that one must have hit you hard.

Christiane Amanpour: [00:28:35] Yes. Yes. Yes. I still don't believe that John is not here. I spent the last weekend of his life with him and his wife and his cousin Anthony- who was dying of cancer- and, you know, there were a few friends. And we had a great weekend and we were going to see each other not the next weekend, because that's when he was going to his cousin's wedding, but the following weekend we were going to group-regroup back in Martha's Vineyard. And I probably will never forget ever sitting in in Washington and having CNN call me and say we just want to let you know [crying]- I still have a very hard time with it, but they just wanted to let me know that the plane was missing and John was going with his sister- sorry, with his wife and her sister- to his cousin's wedding in Hyannis Port. And the plane was missing and they didn't know where it was. And I think it took- I can't remember how long, it seemed like an eternity- but certainly several days until they found it. And it was a big loss and a big shock. And it still is. I think none of his friends have gotten over it. And his family. And I think that beyond the personal loss- I genuinely believe, especially in this climate of, you know, you just look for hope; you look for leaders; you look for possibility and youth and promise. I think the U.S. may have lost out on a future leader. I do. And I think that's a shame.

David Axelrod: [00:30:36] You went to CNN almost from its inception.

Christiane Amanpour: [00:30:42] I did- three years in. CNN started- Ted Turner famously announced CNN would launch June 1st 1980 at- if I'm not mistaken- a Jewish country club in Atlanta. That was our first headquarters: colonnades, sort of the Gone With The Wind kind of mansion. And also.

David Axelrod: [00:31:03] I don't remember many Jews in Gone With the Wind, but anyway.

Christiane Amanpour: [00:31:04] No, the the mansion!

David Axelrod: [00:31:06] Oh, I see.

Christiane Amanpour: [00:31:06] It was a Jewish country club. I'm saying what it looked like! Don't be so literal David. And Ted had created a satellite garden. So there were these massive,

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO INSTITUTE OF POLITICS & CNN PRESENT

THE AXE FILES

great satellite dishes in the garden. And that's what was sending CNN around the world. But yeah, I joined it as a start up and as I like to say, for us it was graduate school on the job. None of us- most of us who joined at entry level positions- none of us had been to graduate school. We all thought oh gosh, well here's this place, they are looking for people, we'll go, learn on the job and then join the big leagues afterwards. Little did we know that CNN would be the big league.

David Axelrod: [00:31:50] You know, I never went to journalism school and I kind of learned by writing for smaller papers and then larger papers and so on. How much did journalism school actually benefit you? Now you already told me you're a benefactor, but it seems to me that that this is one of those things that you just have to learn by doing.

Christiane Amanpour: [00:32:15] I didn't actually go to journalism school. I mean I did liberal arts degree with a focus on journalism at University of Rhode Island. Look, I think there are certain technical things that you can be taught, particularly in the broadcast. We're sitting here with two microphones and it takes- and you're sitting there with the controls-

David Axelrod: [00:32:33] Talking to Zane, our tech here.

Christiane Amanpour: [00:32:37] With his Poppy on. I'm very pleased to see you wearing the poppy. It's going to be Armistice Day in a couple of days. And this is for all the fallen. And I'm particularly sensitive to that given all the war that I've covered. So I digress.

David Axelrod: [00:32:53] I think we left it at, oh, journalism school.

Christiane Amanpour: [00:32:55] Yeah, Journalism school.

David Axelrod: [00:32:56] And then we'll bring it back to the Jewish Gone With The Wind.

Christiane Amanpour: [00:32:58] There you go. So all I'm saying is that off we went to be the band of merry men and women who were going to launch this start up and- and here's where it gets beautiful- challenge the world; challenge the system; be the original disrupters in that industry.

David Axelrod: [00:33:14] And he was a real iconoclast. He was he was a disrupter.

Christiane Amanpour: [00:33:18] He was. I honestly- if you asked me- I honestly think I died and went to journalism heaven. I managed throughout my career to work for two of the greatest people in this world- in this world, I'm talking about journalism and broadcast- Ted Turner and Don Hewitt. For nine years, I was a contributor to 60 minutes. And it is like dying and going to heaven. It is when you work for people like that who are brilliant; who are revolutionary; who are creators; who are not afraid to be on the cutting edge even when society goes against them. I just think of Ted- you know Ted was always sort of, kind of laughed at. Oh he's a little crazy, you know. No, he's not, frankly, he's not. Because if he really was crazy, we wouldn't have CNN. He wouldn't have won the America's Cup. He wouldn't be the leading of the modern day philanthropists with everybody from Warren Buffett and Gates and all the rest of it following Ted's lead. He wouldn't have recognized climate change and bought up the most private land in

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO INSTITUTE OF POLITICS & CNN PRESENT

THE AXE FILES

the United States of America just to save it. And in South America as well. So, you might think he's a little crazy, but he's really not. He's brilliant.

David Axelrod: [00:34:30] I have to tell you- apropos to nothing- but it's one of my favorite stories about the encounter that Barack Obama, as a candidate, had with Ted Turner in 2008. And Ted Turner said "Barack, I'm giving you the max. And I don't want anything for it. I don't want anything." And Obama put his hand on Turner's shoulder and said "Ted, you don't need anything." And I think they both had a big laugh. But he is an American original, there's no doubt.

Christiane Amanpour: [00:35:04] He really is. And a hero. He is a hero. And, you know, for me, I'm obsessed by leadership, and, to an extent, by looking for inspiration and at models that you can aspire to and all of that and I really genuinely believe and I'm so thankful that I got to work for people who I a. loved and b. proudly followed and respected them. You know what I mean. And and that was really great. Really great.

David Axelrod: [00:35:41] The world came to know you. You became a living legend in the 90s, first covering the first Iraq war-

Christiane Amanpour: [00:35:54] The Gulf War.

David Axelrod: [00:35:55] - The Gulf War, yes. And how did that come about- how did you end up as the.

Christiane Amanpour: [00:36:03] That's a very good question because I certainly wasn't senior. And there were a lot of men with their, you know, bomber jackets wanting to go to cover this war, which of course they did. But, so I woke up in Frankfurt the morning that Saddam Hussein- which was August 2nd 1990- invaded Kuwait and I thought I'm going. I'm going. I've got to cover this. And a week before I had written a little memo on the old, you know, whatever, typewriter to my bosses saying, you know I think it's getting a little hot in the Middle East, you know all this Saddam and Kuwait and this row they're having over the border. And I got this huge- I got it faxed back to me with a big cross in it saying "not now." So, a few days later.

David Axelrod: [00:36:50] Where were you based in?

Christiane Amanpour: [00:36:51] In Frankfurt. So this was my very first assignment as a foreign correspondent. And I only got it because the more senior guys didn't want it and it was going, begging, and I was, you know, like a terrier snapping at the heels of my foreign editor saying "I'll go, I'll go." Anyway, so I went to Frankfurt. And that's where I heard this news. And I just went into the zone. And I called up the desk and said "I'll go, I'll go to wherever," cause you couldn't get into Iraq because you just can't, Kuwait was invaded so all the airspace and land space was closed, because the Iraqis were in Kuwait and where else were you to go? So it became Dubai; the Emirates hosted the initial waves of press. And I was told, no it's OK, you know, the group from Paris are going and this and that. So, in any event, I booked myself on a flight and I called and I said "Are you sure?" And they said "Christian, what are you waiting for, go! The Paris people can't get on the plane" or whatever it was; they couldn't get there fast enough. So I went. And for me, the rest is history. I mean, it was just, you know, it was just great. There I was. First of all, far from the battlefield because we were in Dubai and everything

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO INSTITUTE OF POLITICS & CNN PRESENT

THE AXE FILES

was happening in Kuwait but people couldn't get into there. So, we had to figure out where to report it. So, you know, we flooded the zone, so to speak, so did every other organization. So we all went to places around Iraq and Kuwait. And I remember going from the Emirates, we went then to Egypt where President Mubarak was having an Arab League summit. What are we going to do? How are we going to deal with, you know, Saddam? Then, we all went to Saudi Arabia, which opened its borders because they had, you know, America had said "we're going to save you, we're going to protect you" and so planeloads of journalists including myself went to Saudi Arabia and basically that's where we stayed from the summer of 1990 until January of '91 when the war broke out, preparing and watching and reporting on the buildup by the United States and its allies. And when I think back to 1990 and I imagine a force of 500,000 plus ground forces, air forces, all these people- not just from America and the traditional NATO allies- but Syria, Egypt, you know, countries all over- obviously Saudi Arabia- all over were enjoined to that battle and it was incredible to watch that build up and then, you know, to be there when the war started. So I did a little bit of it from an aircraft carrier at the beginning of the war, which I was very teed off about, because I felt like I was way too far away in the Red Sea on the USS JFK. There was a little bit of poetry there. But then I went to Baghdad- I went to Baghdad for the last couple of weeks of the war. But I do remember one of the things that sticks out in my memory- apart from all the amazing experiences during that time- was that when I first went, it was myself- a female- plus my two female colleagues: camera woman Jane Evans, sound woman Maria Fleet and me. And when we got there, everybody said "Christian, doesn't CNN know, you know, women don't get to do anything here in Saudi Arabia. This is an all male outfit." And I'm like "Well, here we are." And we got serious scoops for that. And, again, I'm really junior- they're all these network guys who are well-known to all you viewers and all the rest of it. And I got a couple of scoops because I was a girl and the princes decided they're going to put this girl, who obviously wasn't going to create much trouble, in a car and drive her to the border. And I got lots of good pictures and stories. And it was great. It was really great.

David Axelrod: [00:40:50] We'll be right back with Christiane Amanpour.

David Axelrod: [00:41:08] On the Gulf War, the United States and the allied forces obviously ejected Iraq quickly and could have marched right to Baghdad and could have toppled Saddam Hussein. Did you recognize at the time that that was a wise strategic decision or did that over time occur to you?

Christiane Amanpour: [00:41:39] You know, that occurred to me slightly later, but I will tell you something interesting and this, I thought, was my value added as an Iranian that- I don't know whether you remember- but there were all these analysts and people who somehow doubted that the might of the United States of America and its hundreds of thousands of allies might be crushed by Saddam Hussein. Do you remember that?

David Axelrod: [00:42:03] Yes.

Christiane Amanpour: [00:42:03] I mean do you remember that nonsense? And all I could think of- without being, you know, without having a massive amount of experience, which I didn't- was that, hang on a second, Saddam invaded Iran, my country, at its weakest point in 1980, right after the revolution, and Saddam lost; he ended up losing. If he lost to Iran, he is not going to win against the United States of America. So I had that feeling that the U.S. could do whatever with its allies. And I was surprised, because I was in Baghdad at the time when we

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO INSTITUTE OF POLITICS & CNN PRESENT

THE AXE FILES

heard that the war was over and I was surprised because we expected everybody on the streets in Baghdad, I promise you, were saying to me, "are the Marines coming? Are they coming? Are the Americans coming?" Once they realized- there was a tiny window when people were really excited in Iraq. Saddam was still in power, remember; he hadn't been dislodged from the presidency. He'd been kicked out of Kuwait, but he was still in power. But, for that moment, for that tiny moment, in March or whenever the war ended, February, March of 1991, the people on the streets believed that the Americans were coming to rescue them. It lasted maybe 24 hours until they realized they weren't. And then they shut up, because what are they going to do. You know, they'd all be executed.

David Axelrod: [00:43:24] And that was the expectation in 2003.

Christiane Amanpour: [00:43:27] Which did happen.

David Axelrod: [00:43:29] -that they would be greeted as liberators.

Christiane Amanpour: [00:43:31] Well, they were. On the day after Baghdad fell, for sure. It was only afterward- after a series of dumb decisions and then there was an insurgency- that it all went to hell. Yeah all of that. I mean, you know, it was crazy what happened after the second Iraq war. The arrogance, the hubris, and, as a reporter, when we were there, seeing what was going on; the looting for instance, which as soon as they realized there was no- the Iraqis- that there was no institutional law and order, because, you know, the Americans had said to the military "go home and we won't hurt you. And then you can join and, you know, be part of a new Iraq." So they all went home. They didn't provide any resistance to the American forces in the 2003 war. And then they were left home and dismantled and fired and all of that. So what did that do? It created a big vacuum on the streets; you need law and order and there was none. And the Americans weren't providing it. I sat with American forces on their vehicles going through the streets, you know, filming and doing the reports of what was going on in the immediate aftermath of the liberation of Baghdad to watch people coming out of palaces and hospitals and schools, you know, with vases and chairs and tables and hospital equipment, literally looting anything that moved or didn't move. And I remember saying to the lieutenant colonel who we were traveling with "aren't you going to do something?" "not our job ma'am." And that went on for too long and then of course you had those people who had been dismissed and left home became the backbone of the insurgency. So when we tried to start warning, I remember, Rumsfeld and the others, "OK this looting is out of control." Rumsfeld famously said "oh, hang on, isn't that the same vase. I think I've seen that on a loop coming out of every building." "No, Mr. Rumsfeld, no." This was widespread and it was deteriorating law and order and the system was imploding. Then, we started to report about the insurgency and that we were pooh poohed as well. The U.S. didn't take the insurgency seriously until- I mean, it wasn't too late but it was very late.

David Axelrod: [00:46:03] What about the notion that the U.S. underestimated sectarianism generally as a consequence of toppling Saddam?

Christiane Amanpour: [00:46:14] That's possible as well. I think that a lot of things went wrong after- basically they didn't have the plan for post liberation. There was a plan. The State Department had a plan, famously. But, the State Department plan didn't get enacted. The Rumsfeld plan got enacted. And the Paul Bremer plan got enacted. And the George W. Bush

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO INSTITUTE OF POLITICS & CNN PRESENT

THE AXE FILES

wannabe activists who were there in their W t-shirts in the CPA- the Coalition Provisional Authority- that was their plan. And their plan was based on, I don't know. I mean, I don't know. We couldn't believe it. We just watched it. And I'm not trying to be flip about it. It was so bad that this is the result that we have- that we are still paying for that; we are still, the world is still paying the backlash and the blowback from the post- Iraq war. Not the Iraq war. The post. Because I still believe- and I may become very unpopular saying this- but had there been a real plan on that day in April when the statue was toppled and Saddam was no longer there, had there been a real post-war plan, I believe a success could have been made out of a Saddam-less Iraq. That's what I believe. And many people believe that. It's just that there wasn't a plan. And it all went to hell. And they were so bent on justifying their WMD and their this and that and then they, you know, Iran comes in and then the whole sectarianism thing starts and you get the Sunni insurgency. So it's- what's the right word for that? I mean, I think it's a real opportunity lost, because I genuinely believe that Iraq would not have got rid of Saddam Hussein without help from outside. He had been there for decades. He was a terrible tyrant. He, you know, used chemical weapons. He executed people. I remember when we used to cover Iraq while he was still in power. And this was between the first Gulf War and the second Gulf War. It was terrifying. It was literally a totalitarian state. You believed that on every lamppost, there was a camera watching you. Certainly the people believed it. We believed in all of our hotel rooms that were cameras watching us through the TV. Everything we did; everything everybody did was monitored. Every member of a family would have to keep their own thoughts to themselves not knowing which member of their family might be an informer. It was a terrifying place and something had to help push Saddam Hussein out. And the U.S. did it, but unfortunately, based on a faulty premise that they then had to defend, and based on not reacting correctly, or not being flexible enough to react to the day after. And there were some great generals on the ground from David Petraeus on up who really understood what was at stake and could have done I think a much better job had they had the political apparatus.

David Axelrod: [00:49:22] You raise an interesting question, which is what is the responsibility of the U.S. to push out tyrants? And it becomes really important because President Trump has signaled that human rights is no longer a guiding principle of American foreign policy.

Christiane Amanpour: [00:49:44] Yeah, I mean, I think, to be honest with you, the post-Iraq debacle has put a damper on any of that what I call humanitarian intervention- the things that President Clinton and Tony Blair did, for instance, in Kosovo.

David Axelrod: [00:49:59] Which was another of your big stories.

Christiane Amanpour: [00:50:02] Bosnia was the first one of course. They were very late and there was hundreds of thousands of deaths and a full scale genocide in Bosnia before they intervened and then they did intervene with bombing the Serbian military positions. And at the same time having a political framework that ended up being the Dayton Peace Accords. So there was a coordinated proper military and diplomatic end to the Bosnia war. And then, I think partly because of what we all did in telling the story and making another Bosnia unconscionable for our Democratic leaders, you know, you couldn't have the next president of the United States or the next British prime minister or the next French president or whatever, witness this again in Kosovo. We made it impossible for our democracies, I think, and that's why I'm proud of what we did in Bosnia as storytellers. All the press. Everybody did a great job making this front and center and humanizing the conflict there and making it impossible for our elected leaders to

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO INSTITUTE OF POLITICS & CNN PRESENT

THE AXE FILES

continue to turn away. And, therefore, before it became a wholesale genocide in Kosovo, Clinton, Blair, others gathered their own coalition. It wasn't formally NATO; it was a coalition of 19 willing nations with the acquiescence of Russia, you know, all the others. And they stopped a Serbian led genocide by Milosevic, or a hard line- I won't lump all Serbs in the same bracket. But the presidency of Slobodan Milosevic was prevented from creating a genocide in Kosovo. And I have been very critical of the Obama administration for not intervening in Syria because I believe- and we don't need to go into the politics of it; I know what President Obama says and he he says that he would stick with what he did, even to this day- but I believe that what happened in Syria is what we're all paying for now. The refugees, the terrorism, the blowback, the ISIS, the political populism, the waves of disruption. Not to mention, of course, the chemical weapons.

David Axelrod: [00:52:12] Now the question, first of all the question is what Americans would tolerate, but the second question is post-military action in Syria, what would- how would that space be governed and what would that commitment entail? I mean, I'm not arguing one way or the other but it's a complex challenge.

Christiane Amanpour: [00:52:37] Of course its a complex challenge. I mean, everything in this regard is complex. It's not like, you know, playing dominoes. It is actually very complex. But I do believe that it could have been done and I think there was enough of a coalition and enough willingness and also Assad hadn't done as much destruction in 2012, for instance, as he then ended up doing and and, you know, I mean now the Russians rule the roost there. The Iranians rule the roost there. None of that happened. They didn't enter, you know- I strongly believe that had actually been taken around 2012, it would have been very different. Or 2013.

David Axelrod: [00:53:14] Talk about Iran and where Iran is today. Obviously, this is of interest for two reasons: one is there is this tug and pull now about whether the Trump administration will in some way pull out of the nuclear agreement.

Christiane Amanpour: [00:53:33] Well, as nefarious as some of Iran's actions are, the big challenge was always, on a global scale, to contain Iran's nuclear program, which President Obama- the administration- did. You gather this coalition, there was the weight of the sanctions and then there was the willingness for diplomacy- helped and actually enabled by the election of Hassan Rouhani. That the Iranian people elected a reformer; a relative moderate and otherwise this wouldn't have been able to happen. Nobody would have been able to do this with Ahmadinejad.

David Axelrod: [00:54:05] This is something that I think is not commonly understood. Because the president himself- Trump- has talked about how fundamentally antidemocratic Iran is and so on. But.

Christiane Amanpour: [00:54:21] Well, it's not a democracy as we know it because it's a managed system. But if you take other American allies- let's say Saudi Arabia or the Gulf Emirates or whatever. I mean, you know, those are monarchies; they have no political space; they have no meaningful elections. Iran, to an extent, has at least, you know, you can choose between a hardliner and a moderate and that makes a difference.

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO INSTITUTE OF POLITICS & CNN PRESENT

THE AXE FILES

David Axelrod: [00:54:46] It does. But I guess the question is what is the potential for the triumph of democracy over theocracy?

Christiane Amanpour: [00:54:57] I think that that's a very good question and many people have believed that that's going to happen and it hasn't happened yet and I think I don't know how it's going to happen but- or when it's going to happen. I don't know whether all these old ones have to die off and something different comes in its space. But I do know that Iran is a very young country with the majority of its population under the age of 21- something like three quarters. Very, very highly educated. Very tech savvy. Very connected and plugged in despite the best efforts of the regime to keep them from being fully online and on social media. Every time the regime puts up a block, creative people go around. We used to call it the cat and mouse. You know, it's been going on for decades. When the regime tries to block them from access to the outside world, there's a whole system of clever young techies who give you the the alternative software. In any event, they're very connected. And they have made it clear over and over again that they want a different life; that they want a life that's connected to the rest of the world; that they want a life that's more normal; that they want a decent economy; that they want to be proud of their country; that they want to be able to travel to other parts of the world. So, in all of that, they chose the leader who could potentially give them a little bit more of that because the hardliners would not, because the rest of the world wouldn't engage with the hardliners and the hardliners wouldn't engage with the rest of the world. So I think the confluence of an Obama administration that was willing to do the diplomacy and an Iranian president who was willing and brought his hard liners along- because people forget that it's not just in the United States that you have opposition. You do in other countries as well. And most particularly in Iran. So I think that confluence of the sanctions that did the work; of the alliance that was the Europe and the United States, China, Russia, the willingness of Iran to take, you know, to do this and to need to get out of under the yoke of the sanctions came to a good agreement. And again, we say good, not perfect. Good should not- perfect should not be the enemy of the good in these mightily important situations. So, given that everybody said that the biggest global challenge would be Iran's nuclear program; given that this was solved to the greatest extent possible at the time for the next couple of decades under the Obama administration, that was something that the world could breathe a little easier afterwards. And to see it all be put into play again is very destabilizing, particularly as you have a very real issue- much, much worse and much, much more dangerous- in North Korea, which actually has nuclear devices, which actually has tested them, which actually has intercontinental ballistic missile ability and continuing to perfect them and which is now perfecting the militarization of a nuclear weapon to put on a long range missile. That's a problem. And to tear up the Iran deal- first of all, the signal it sends.

David Axelrod: [00:58:04] To North Korea about negotiating.

Christiane Amanpour: [00:58:06] Or anybody that you want to negotiate with. Hang on a second, you're going to sign on the dotted line with the United States a deal that's enshrined in the U.N. Security Council and becomes a resolution and it's dealt with all the other countries who are important. You're going to rip that up. What does that say? What does that say to anybody who you're trying to convince; entice- force; negotiate; compromise with to try to to have that solution. But worse, even worse, what does it mean if you've got now two rogue nuclear problems? What if Iran decides that oh my God, you know, we're going to have to- I

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO INSTITUTE OF POLITICS & CNN PRESENT

THE AXE FILES

don't think they will- I hope that this deal won't fall apart. But, when you've got one big thing to deal with, you really don't want to be creating another big thing.

David Axelrod: [00:58:53] Christians Amanpour, so good to be with you.

Christiane Amanpour: [00:58:56] I could talk to you for several hours and look forward to many future conversations. David Axelrod, thank you very much.

Conclusion: [00:59:06] Thank you for listening to the Axe Files, part of the CNN podcast network. For more episodes of The Axe Files, visit CNN.com/podcast and subscribe on iTunes, Stitcher or your favorite app. And for more programming from the University of Chicago Institute of Politics visit politics.uchicago.edu.