

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO INSTITUTE OF POLITICS & CNN PRESENT

# THE AXE FILES

## The Axe Files - Ep. 195: David Sanger

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

**Axelrod:** [00:00:15] I would be hard put to think of a journalist in this country who has broken more big stories about national security over the last three decades than David Sanger of The New York Times. His breakthrough stories on the North Korean nuclear program on Iran on cybersecurity have earned him numerous awards but more importantly shone a bright light in dark corners of our national security structure. He came by the Institute of Politics the other day to talk about the struggle with North Korea over their nuclear arsenal. And I sat down to talk to him about the many stories that he's written and his career in journalism. David Sanger it's always good to see you.

**Sanger:** [00:01:01] Great to be back here with you David.

**Axelrod:** [00:01:03] I have to and thanks for coming to the Institute of Politics you're here to talk about North Korea and we're going to get to that but I have to ask you about you. One thing that comes up as one reads about you is that everybody seemed to know that you were going to be a newspaper man that was you were headed in that direction. And yet I look in your background your folks weren't journalists. Tell me when did it when did this inspiration come to you and why?

**Sanger:** [00:01:34] Well everybody knew except me of course right? My dad who is 94 and doing well worked for IBM actually and so from him I got a lot of my technology interests played later

**Axelrod:** [00:01:52] Useful

**Sanger:** [00:01:53] Yeah pretty useful. And my mom worked with the school district in Westchester County where I grew up in White Plains which is north of New York City. But there was journalism back in the family. My grandfather Elliott Sanger had been a member of the Columbia University School of Journalism class of 1917.

**Axelrod:** [00:02:17] No kidding.

**Sanger:** [00:02:17] Exactly 100 years ago. One of the first journalism schools.

**Axelrod:** [00:02:19] Wow. I didn't realize they had the Columbia Journalism School in 1917.

**Sanger:** [00:02:26] It had just started a few years before. And it's the same in the same building that it is today. And got sort of dragged into a longtime family business that started down when the family moved to Texas and kind of hated it but went off in the middle of the Depression to start the country's first classical

**Axelrod:** [00:02:50] WQXR. I grew up in New York and listening to WQXR.

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**Sanger:** [00:02:55] He was the co-founder of that with a friend of his who had been experimenting with this wild new technology called FM. And they sold it to the New York Times in 1945 for what was the biggest media deal in history at the time. It was like a million dollars.

**Axelrod:** [00:03:11] No kidding.

**Sanger:** [00:03:11] Right. All of which went to pay off their huge debts right that they at the time. But he stayed on for another 20 some odd years and got a lot of New York Times correspondents to go on radio and they would do this amazing show where they called around to foreign correspondents over scratchy phone lines that I used to listen to as a kid and I kept thinking wow this is pretty cool. You can be a foreign correspondent. And he actually lived long enough to see me get off and get assigned to my first job.

**Axelrod:** [00:03:51] And you were a stringer from a very early age for the New York Times. How did that did he help wire that for you?

**Sanger:** [00:03:59] He didn't. He had left the Times 20 years before 15 years before I you know came of age to go there. So when I got hired at the Times as a stringer and a news clerk later on running pieces of paper around at a time when we were just bringing computers into the newsroom nobody there really knew him or you know knew knew of him and he had been off in the radio station. But my first stories for the Times were for a now defunct Westchester County supplement that we used to turn out and I wrote some stories in high school including about issues of free press for high school newspapers the thing that high school news editors often often feel strongly about because they run into principles as I did. So I wrote a number of pieces and then started writing some things for them went to college and continued on as as a stringer while I was also on my collage paper. The word Stringer of course known to you from you know your days.

**Axelrod:** [00:05:11] Yes I was a stringer as well here at the University of Chicago for the Washington Post and Time.

**Sanger:** [00:05:17] We gotta tell people that the phrase comes from the fact that they used to pay you by measuring the length of your story with a string.

**Axelrod:** [00:05:27] Yes and not very much and not very much by the way.

**Sanger:** [00:05:31] Some things stay the same.

**Axelrod:** [00:05:32] So you worked at did you say you worked as a kid in the newsroom as well?

**Sanger:** [00:05:37] So so I went to college and then I had to decide am I going to go to law school like all the rest of my friends?

**Axelrod:** [00:05:42] And you wrote at college at the Harvard Crimson the fabled Harvard Crimson.

**Sanger:** [00:05:49] Right.

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**Axelrod:** [00:05:50] And as a stringer I read somewhere that you you actually landed a piece on the on the front page is that possible of the Times?

**Sanger:** [00:05:57] I had a couple of front page pieces in The Times as a stringer your byline never showed up in those days it was this little line that said special to the New York Times to the point that my college roommates used to call me hey special.

**Axelrod:** [00:06:12] Well it's good to be special.

**Sanger:** [00:06:13] Right right. So the those stories you know got me going and I've decided I've got to go see what the newsroom is like and that wasn't easy. One of the senior editors at The Times at that time has now long since passed away I remember saying to me my senior year well the newsroom's very crowded like I shouldn't go and like help stuff it up. He should see it today.

**Axelrod:** [00:06:40] Yeah I bet. Do you and it probably was your classmates at that eminent university probably were headed other places was there was there a lot of interest in being a journalist?

**Sanger:** [00:06:54] There was. There was a lot of interest in being a journalist. So my first day at The Crimson I met a guy who turned out to become a lifelong friend who was also trying to get on The Crimson. His name was Nick Kristoff.

**Axelrod:** [00:07:08] Yeah he's done well.

**Sanger:** [00:07:09] He did OK. And we were tutored in how to write a lead by Susan Schirra who later became the deputy executive editor of The Times and is now covering all kinds of fascinating gender issues. But we had many other journalists- Jeff Toobin was on that same group that at The Crimson.

**Axelrod:** [00:07:34] Took a little detour to law school.

**Sanger:** [00:07:35] Took a little detour that turned out to work out well. Bill McKibben was running The Crimson at that time. And Sue Faludi who you've read on many issues. So we had a we had a pretty full newsroom with people who were pretty active.

**Axelrod:** [00:07:52] So what was it like making the transition to the newsroom itself. I mean I found it an extraordinary experience the energy of a newsroom when I left college and went to work at The Chicago Tribune. What was your experience when you?

**Sanger:** [00:08:05] Same thing. I mean if you if you love the collaboration and sometimes the competition of a newsroom and you know we still work out we all look like we're selling insurance we work out in you know open cubicles and if you went down and looked at it it might not look so impressive but there is a collaboration of ideas in a newsroom that I've only seen replicated at a university you know where people actually sit and try to go talk their way through a story and I can't tell you how many.

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**Axelrod:** [00:08:38] Deadlines are shorter in journalism.

**Sanger:** [00:08:40] They're are a lot shorter and I actually think the collaboration may be better in a newsroom. I teach a course on national security now and the pace of the newsroom versus the University always sort of strikes me. But I do have to say that there are a lot of stories we've broken that just come from that open kind of conversation. For example during the Bush administration I remember going out having coffee with a great friend of mine Tom Shanker who covered the Pentagon. He's now an editor.

**Axelrod:** [00:09:10] Tom and I were colleagues. In fact Tom worked for me when I was a city hall bureau chief at the Tribune. He started there.

**Sanger:** [00:09:17] So you know what a great collaborative character he is.

**Axelrod:** [00:09:21] Absolutely, yeah.

**Sanger:** [00:09:21] We're sitting there having coffee one day in a Starbucks around the corner from the Times bureau in Washington and we're talking about things we're hearing happening- he was covering the Pentagon I was covering the White House at the time- about pressuring President Bush to close Guantanamo Bay and we realized in the course of our conversation the more we got into it that Condoleezza Rice and the defense secretary at the time Bob Gates must have teamed together to try to get President Bush to close Gitmo and overrun lots of opposition they had. And it just came out of a conversation like the one we're having today. We went off and reported it. It turned into a big story that outraged President Bush because he thought that someone was leaking to us what was going on. But we had actually from various things we picked up in the hallways intuited our way to the story not the last time that's happened.

**Axelrod:** [00:10:25] And not the last time presidents were ticked off about perceptions of leaks either.

**Sanger:** [00:10:32] Or stories that Tom and I have written or just that I've written or written with other colleagues.

**Sanger:** [00:10:35] We'll get to that. You know before we leave collaborations I read about how you met your wife. And it sounded exactly like a scene out of Animal House where you went to meet you went to take out a date or you had a date with someone and you showed up and your date was not there. She had found she had found somebody far more interesting and better looking which was not hard.

**Axelrod:** [00:11:02] So out of the goodness of her heart your future wife sat down with you and spent quality time with you to work you through this trauma. Is that is that a true story?

**Axelrod:** [00:11:19] It's a true story except as soon as I sat down with her I realized I had done just fine by missing the other date.

**Sanger:** [00:11:27] So the trauma wasn't too great.

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**Sanger:** [00:11:28] The trauma I recovered from about 10 seconds.

**Axelrod:** [00:11:32] We getting back to the New York Times.

**Sanger:** [00:11:38] And by the way we've been Cheryl and I have now been married for 30 years plus and we met our freshman year which you know our own kids think is hilarious.

**Axelrod:** [00:11:49] Yeah yeah that's pretty quaint in this day and age. The at the Times you started writing about technology pretty early and you mentioned that your dad worked at IBM. So were you drawn to this? Did you raise your hand and say I want to write about this?

**Sanger:** [00:12:09] So I had had had some summer internships including one at the Wall Street Journal with a wonderful editor in the Boston bureau of The Journal who was fascinated by this newfangled thing that was coming out called a personal computer being built by Apple. And so I under his direction began writing some about this whole question would people actually use computers at home? And I remember discussing this with my dad who had spent his career working on big mainframes like the IBM System 360 and that designed some of IBM big computer centers and even he was quite skeptical that people would find a use for computer at home. Now you know he's never without his his iPad anywhere.

**Axelrod:** [00:12:52] So did you go out and talk to Jobs and those guys?

**Sanger:** [00:12:56] I did. In fact I was with Steve Jobs for the week that ran up to the introduction of the Macintosh in New York. And you know I knew this was like a big thing at the time but only in retrospect does it seem you know so huge. I was out in Santa Fe this summer and speaking out in Santa Fe and they invited me to an opera they created about Steve Jobs. And it had that week in the opera. So to sort of think that I had been involved and that was quite remarkable and then I began writing about the personal computer industry with Andy Pollack who was a great technology writer for The Times just recently retired from the Times and we did that for a number of years and I was down in Washington in 1986 writing a story that you could probably still write today about how screwed up the computer systems of the IRS were when the space shuttle exploded and we thought at first that it was actually a computer error. And that was how I got placed on the Challenger space shuttle team.

**Axelrod:** [00:14:04] You guys won a Pulitzer Prize for that reporting.

**Sanger:** [00:14:08] We did. I was I was 26. I was incredibly lucky to be put on a team with some really terrific reporters. And we found two or three of us found the engineers who admitted to us that this was no accident at all that they had they had seen the 14 or 15 previous space shuttle missions nearly blow up and I remember the evening that I was able to get Roger Beausoleil who was an engineer working for Morton Thiokol in the hills of of Utah to hand over to me the faxes he had sent the night before the launch with the graphs that showed that if they launch at the temperatures that it was going to be a very cold night in Florida the likelihood of an accident of burn through from these these rocket engines was extremely high. And that's exactly what happened the next day.

**Axelrod:** [00:15:07] And you knew at that moment that you had in your hands something not to be crass but that it was explosive in and of itself as a news story.

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**Sanger:** [00:15:18] We we had a big investigation under way and we knew that we had sort of with that moment probably cracked the case that it wasn't a computer glitch. I was put on the story for the wrong reason.

**Axelrod:** [00:15:28] Yeah.

**Sanger:** [00:15:29] As things happen with reporters. And we were ahead of a presidential commission that was being run by Bill Rogers the former secretary of state during the Nixon administration. He was by that time Baks private practice and President Reagan had told him whatever you do don't embarrass NASA. We have to you know keep the space shuttle. So the Commission initially was not very interested in figuring out what had happened if it meant embarrassing NASA save for a couple of members who really wanted to dig down to the truth including Professor Fineman the famed physicist who had sat atop a nuclear weapon the night before it was first tested at the Trinity site as a young man and he ended up being a terrific source for sort of talking me through what it actually happened.

**Axelrod:** [00:16:30] So I don't know whether this opened the door to it but you then realized your ambition based on your early radio experiences listening to the radio to become a foreign correspondent.

**Sanger:** [00:16:45] Yeah usually if you win a Pulitzer with the Times you've got a couple of months before they forget that you won a Pulitzer to sort of raise your hand for something. And I raised my hand to jump the queue and go to Japan as a foreign correspondent. And it seemed to fit nicely with my technology background because these were the days when Japan was eating our lunch going to take over the world producing all the world's computer chips dominating our technology and and Andy Grove the founder of Intel used to come out and give speeches I teased him about this later on about how the United States would become a techno colony of Japan. It didn't quite turn out that way. But I had six fabulous years and Cheryl and I had just gotten married and we moved out. It was a moment to not only exploit Japan but explore all of Asia and it was during that time by my first six or eight months there that I began to notice that the North Koreans who couldn't build a lightbulb were building a nuclear reactor and wrote some of the first pieces about that.

**Axelrod:** [00:17:58] I want to ask you about that. We're going to take a short break and we'll be right back with David Sanger of The New York Times. Obviously if you ran the tape backward that would be a pretty significant moment given where we are today. Based on your reporting on this over now decades.

**Sanger:** [00:18:22] Thanks for reminding me that David.

**Axelrod:** [00:18:25] It's hard you know it lends drama to the story. Based on decades of reporting what what could have been done what should have been done and what to retard that programs stop that program could it have been stopped? And explain what your perception is of the motivation of the North Koreans.

**Sanger:** [00:18:51] Well the motivation I think has changed a little bit over time. The program started because Kim Il Sung the country's founder and the grandfather of the current president

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of North Korea remembered that Douglas MacArthur had sought nuclear weapons to end the Korean War. He wanted to go bomb North Korea and along the way bomb the Chinese who were coming in on North Korea's behalf between 1950 and 1953. Harry Truman didn't think this was such a great idea and fired MacArthur famously. Yes but the North Koreans never forgot and believed that if they were going to keep their country from being invaded by the United States they needed nuclear weapons. And I think that the grandfather and the father pursued along those lines grandson and we can come back to this later on Kim Jong un I think has greater ambitions. To your question could we have stopped this. David this has been one of the greatest long running failures of the U.S. government for understandable reasons for the past 25 years back to George H.W. Bush. It is not the fault of Democrats or Republicans. It is the fault of Democrats and Republicans. At each point when the North Koreans made an incremental advance whether it was building that reactor I described before or whether it was beginning to build their missiles or whether it was taking the plutonium out of the reactor and shipping it off to a secret spot at a moment that we were busy invading Iraq and not paying as much attention presidents had the opportunity to go take action to stop them. And the one who considered it most closely was Bill Clinton in 1994 during a very big crisis where there was a plan afoot to actually take military action if they needed to.

**Axelrod:** [00:20:47] And this was before the buildup on the part of the North Koreans that would have threatened in a dramatic way the South Koreans.

**Sanger:** [00:20:57] It was before the North Koreans had tested a nuclear weapon. They didn't test one until 2006. But the story we're talking about starts in the late 80s and goes all the way through the Bush administration in the 90s so the Clinton and the Bush administrations. At every point each American president said it's not worth the risk to Seoul which the North Koreans could destroy with conventional weapons right along the DMZ to try to stop them and create a crisis. And each one of those decisions was perfectly defensible if you took it in isolation. If you stack them up over 25 years you get the North Korea we have today which is armed with 20 to 60 nuclear weapons depending on whose estimate you believe and missiles that are just about the capability of reaching L.A. Chicago. We don't know yet whether they can actually deliver the weapon and keep it from burning up coming into the atmosphere. But if they can't now they'll get that figured out. So there are a lot of presidents to blame. If you look at any one of their decisions in isolation it's perfectly defensible. But boy you add them up and you've created a new nuclear state run by a pretty unstable guy.

**Axelrod:** [00:22:23] You I'm sure heard the president the other day say people don't like the way I've been talking tough to North Korea well we've spoken weekly for all these years and what has that gotten us. Does he have an argument there?

**Sanger:** [00:22:43] It's sort of not whether you talk toughly or weakly.

**Axelrod:** [00:22:46] Its what you do.

**Sanger:** [00:22:47] It's what you do. So President Bush used to say to me when I was covering the White House which I did from the end of the Clinton administration to most of the Bush administration we're not going to tolerate a nuclear North Korea. In fact he sat down with me just a half a mile from where we're sitting today one day when he was giving a big speech at the Science Museum here right after the North Koreans had conducted the nuclear test and said

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you know we're not going to tolerate this. Well he has tolerated he tolerated it. President Obama and you witnessed a good deal of this in the early days made a perfectly reasonable decision that he should focus on Iran because Iran didn't yet have the bomb and that North Korea was sort of already in the rearview mirror and it was only later in his presidency after you had moved back here that he came to the conclusion that he really needed a crash program to start to stop their missile program.

**Axelrod:** [00:23:50] And you said you think that their motivations have changed. Where are what do you think is going through the mind of Kim Jong un? I know that's a that's a highly speculative question.

**Sanger:** [00:24:05] Right. I mean we have a hard enough time trying to figure out what our own leaders are thinking. So you can imagine how hard it is with Kim Jong un. However if his grandfather and his father were interested mostly in survival there's a lot of evidence to support the theory that Kim Jong un wants more than that that he actually thinks that he can reunify the Korean peninsula under North Korea that South Korea has all the money and the technology but that North Korea has the pure Korean understanding of what Korea should be and that with this weapon it's entirely possible and we just won't know until he's got it and use it. He's got the world's greatest blackmail material. The fact that this broken and broke country who's GDP is about twenty five billion dollars that has fewer internet connections.

**Axelrod:** [00:25:05] What like a quarter or so of Jeff Bezos' net worth.

**Sanger:** [00:25:11] Yes something like that. We have cities in America with significantly bigger GDPs than North Korea. That they could manage to both build a nuclear weapon with a lot of help from the Chinese the Russians and others and actually build cyber weapons that they used quite successfully to attack Sony and then turned around to attack the British hospital system earlier this year you know they're playing well above their weight class.

**Axelrod:** [00:25:46] And what are the options? I want to get to cyber as well. The bigger issue of cyber because I know that's another of your many areas of expertise. But what if you're sitting there you're president of the United States you know what has been said publicly and you've heard the president's rhetoric about fire and fury but the same stakes exist and perhaps at an even greater level that enormous destruction would ensue if there were actually a military engagement in that the Korean peninsula would be in jeopardy perhaps other allies of ours Japan. What is your assessment of what the actual options reasonable options are?

**Sanger:** [00:26:36] Well what the president said starting January 2nd just before he took office in a tweet was that he was going to solve the North Korean nuclear problem. And I wish him luck in that because many of his predecessors have tried that. What his real options are I think there are basically three. I think one which may be the most likely is acquiescence that they will get their capability and that the president will decide as each of his predecessors did that the risk is just too high and that it will split us from the Japanese and the South Koreans who will be on the receiving end of the worst part of this. The second option is that the president decides he's actually going to take some kind of limited military action a preemptive strike against some of those launch facilities or some of the nuclear facilities. If he did this in a kinetic way to blow things up its got all the risk that you just described. And you've heard the South Korean president say that he's not going to permit that to happen. If he really rolls the dice and tries a

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negotiated settlement and if the North Koreans are willing to go along and negotiate which is not at all clear then I think the best he could get would be a freeze of their existing capability

**Axelrod:** [00:28:04] Which is what the Chinese have been pushing.

**Sanger:** [00:28:06] The Chinese have been pushing this the Russians have pushed this. And while it sounds reasonable they freeze their missile tests and their nuclear tests we freeze doing our military exercises the fact of the matter is freezing them in this state is a lot different than freezing them ten years ago. You are essentially enshrining a nuclear capability that is basically what Pakistan's was by the late 90s or early 2000s and leaving yourself open to the possibility that they could always threaten to hit an American city. Now the thought is if you negotiated quickly they couldn't prove that they could hit an American city. If I was Kim Jong un and I actually think he's a pretty rational player in this I wouldn't enter that negotiation until he had actually proven what he can hit and then say sure I'll freeze because at that moment he's accomplished his goal.

**Axelrod:** [00:28:58] Yeah. The other element I suppose is that if any kind of freeze would also require some sort of agreement about fairly aggressive inspections which runs counter to the whole culture of the North Korean regime I mean would they accept that kind of thing?

**Sanger:** [00:29:19] Well the theory of a freeze itself is that you wouldn't need inspections because you would know if they violated it. If they if they tested a nuclear weapon you're going to detect it if they shoot off a missile they'd detect it. But you'd need inspections if you were actually going to freeze them from building up the size of their arsenal. And they have never let inspectors go beyond that one major reactor site at Yongbyon that we talked about from the 1980s and the country is so mountainous that I can't imagine and our intelligence about it so poor that it is very hard to imagine how you would get inspectors into the places you needed them to be or even would know if you had inspected. If you don't know how many nuclear weapons they have if you only have a guess then you'll never know you've rounded them all up.

**Axelrod:** [00:30:11] You've also done extraordinary reporting writing books as well as articles about Iran and their nuclear program. This is now again a very current issue because the president has refused to certify that Iran is abiding by the agreement by the nuclear agreement. First of all talk to me about that nuclear program as opposed to the North Koreans because this agreement as you point out was struck well before they well not well but before they had actual weapons and an arsenal. How effective do you think that agreement has been? And what are the consequences of the president's decision?

**Sanger:** [00:31:04] Well the agreement has been quite effective for at least the year and a half it has been actually implemented and in effect. We have not found any evidence U.S. intelligence agencies haven't found any evidence that they have cheated on what's actually in the agreement which is why the president had to go reach for things beyond the agreement while they're shooting off missiles which they shouldn't do. It's a violation of U.N. resolutions. True but it's not in the agreement. Well they are supporting terrorism and they're menacing their neighbors and all that. Absolutely true. But the theory that the Obama administration went into the to the negotiations with was that it was better to stop Iran from having a nuclear weapon and then confront them on everything else than to let them get a nuclear weapon and try to confront them when they were in nuclear power because that's North Korea. Right.

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**Axelrod:** [00:32:00] Right.

**Sanger:** [00:32:01] And so the one critique that President Trump has that I think is quite accurate about the agreement is that it's not permanent. Starting in Year 10 but really at year 15 the Iranians have a lot of restrictions lifted on them. Well that's a problem. But at a moment when we've got some other problems around the world it strikes me you may want to kick that one down the road a little bit and deal with it when you need you know as that as that moment gets closer and 15 years from now it's not going to be the same supreme leader running Iran might be somebody worse might be somebody easier but its not going to be the same one. And so it struck me that he was looking for a way to fulfill a campaign declaration that he made to me and Maggie Haberman and many others that this was the worst deal ever and he would renegotiate and during one of our interviews with him during the campaign I did say to him at one point so of this 130 140 page agreement what part of it would you have gotten up and walked out over? That was a more difficult question it turned out.

**Axelrod:** [00:33:12] But probably a shorter answer.

**Sanger:** [00:33:13] A very short answer. And he did finally with some coaching end up with it doesn't last long enough. And that's been his main complaint.

**Axelrod:** [00:33:22] I just I don't want to editorialize on this but the thing I don't understand is the agreement did get ninety seven percent of their fissile material out of that country. It did disable reactors and it did retard their program to the point where they were months away from potentially achieving a bomb. And now there's there's at least some period and it does have intrusive inspections that seem to be working.

**Sanger:** [00:33:55] Look if we could get North Korea to anything even close to resembling the Iran deal North Koreans of course have their weapons ready if you could get them back though it would be the greatest diplomatic accomplishment of the century. But it's all a question of sort of the perspective of where you are.

**Axelrod:** [00:34:15] What you you said there could be a different regime in 15 years. One of my questions is what is what are the implications domestically for for Iran if the administration continues down this road because as you know the hardliners were in Iran where as opposed to this agreement has hardliners here in the U.S. So does this does this does this push the country more in one direction or another?

**Sanger:** [00:34:43] It certainly makes Iranians wonder whether the United States will try to block them from getting the benefits they were supposed to get from the deal which was economic re-engagement with the world. It also if you're the North Koreans and you're looking at the United States having changed direction on this deal you sort of say well why would we negotiate a deal with them. I think that you can't overstate here what the president actually accomplished. He decertified the deal which is a communication between the White House and Congress about whether he would certify that they're complying with it. That does not get the United States out of the deal. It doesn't end it. If Congress does nothing and they had 60 days and now many fewer and Congress is very good at doing nothing as you may have noticed.

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**Axelrod:** [00:35:33] I've heard that.

**Sanger:** [00:35:36] If Congress does nothing then the deal remains in place. The president can go out on the campaign trail when he runs for re-election and say I decertified the agreement and his supporters may or may not depending on how much they know about this think well that means he walked out of it when in fact he didn't. And this was what his advisers were sort of manipulating him toward enable him to say that he decertified it but don't actually do something that left it. The big issue is if the Iranians feel that in the end they got tricked and that they didn't get any economic benefit from it when the time runs out on this 10 and 15 years from now there's going to be significant pressure to go back and start up their bomb program.

**Axelrod:** [00:36:19] And do you think that Rowhani or I mean you always get pushback when you say moderates versus but there were there were more hardline people than him he pushed the agreement could he be undermined if there's if there's that perception?

**Sanger:** [00:36:36] It's already happening and he's been reelected once but you know he's going to run out of steam sooner or later. You know as you recall there was just this remarkable alignment. I was out covering this you know day to day and in various European cities as they negotiated. I discovered that you don't get any sympathy from your colleagues when you say I'm stuck in Vienna for five weeks.

**Axelrod:** [00:37:00] Yeah that's not a line I would use. I could have told you that.

**Sanger:** [00:37:04] I should have checked with you first. But it turns out that the Iranian view of this whole thing is if you want to blow up the deal blow up the deal but then give us our 97 percent of our uranium back and then we'll start renegotiating from the start. I don't think that's what Washington has in mind right now.

**Axelrod:** [00:37:24] No I don't think so. One of the things that you reported on in detail was efforts on the part of the U.S. and Israel to undermine the Iranian program using cyber techniques and infiltration techniques to disrupt their production. First of all talk a little bit about Stuxnet and what what what that was and then I want to ask you about a related issue that goes to the essence of reporting on these kinds of national security stories.

**Sanger:** [00:38:04] So Stuxnet was a remarkable and remarkably sophisticated effort by the United States and Israel to use a cyber weapon for the first time that could do what previously you could only accomplish by bombing a facility or sending in saboteurs to blow it up and the target in this case was Iran's nuclear enrichment site. And the program started under President Bush and when President Obama took over President Bush said there are only two programs you really want to go stick with no matter what you may have said on the campaign trail. One was the drone program which as you recall President Obama accelerated significantly. And that one was pretty obvious to everybody. It was sort of the least covert covert program I've ever seen. And the second was a program called Olympic Games which was the code name for this effort to go undermine the Iranian program. During the 2008 campaign one you probably recall pretty well

**Axelrod:** [00:39:06] I do

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**Sanger:** [00:39:07] President Obama then candidate Obama talked a lot about cyber security but he was mostly holding seminars and campaign events around protecting ourselves from cyber intrusions a big issue then and bigger now. When he became president he suddenly discovered he was inheriting this remarkable cyber program which I described in a book called Confront and Conceal and it turns out that that effort which he was reluctant about he was fearful that once it came out he knew eventually it would other countries might use it as an excuse to attack us. It turns out that Stuxnet was the starting gate for the remarkable acceleration in cyber attacks between countries. At the time I was writing that story and covering it we couldn't really find another big state on state attack. The Russians had done some things against Estonia and so forth. Now you know the Iranians have attacked the Saudis. The North Koreans have attacked us at Sony and Britain just this year. The Russians had used cyber techniques as you may have heard about the election.

**Axelrod:** [00:40:24] Yeah I read something about that.

**Sanger:** [00:40:24] You read about that. And it gives you a sense of what the range of cyber weapons are that you can go from blowing up a facility under the sands in Iran to trying to blow up an election using very subtle techniques over social media.

**Axelrod:** [00:40:41] Well and you mention the North Koreans which speaks to the fact that you know it doesn't matter where in the world you are if you have the capability you can create enormous chaos and as you say sub rosa until until it happens.

**Sanger:** [00:41:00] That's right. And even maybe when it happens. So you know people like to compare cyber weapons and nuclear weapons and the comparison doesn't work much because nuclear weapons are on off switch and if the North Koreans used one on us you know what would happen to Pyongyang 45 minutes later. But they felt free to use cyber weapons in a way that they wouldn't even feel free to use saboteurs. So think about the Sony hack. Sony you may remember it for the released e-mails about Angelina Jolie but what really was going on there was they melted down 70 percent of Sony Picture Entertainment's computer systems. Imagine do this thought experiment for a minute David imagine that they had landed some saboteurs at Long Beach and they had called an uber and fought their way through the traffic to get up to the Sony studio and when they got there they had stuck some dynamite under the movie studio and run like hell and you turned on CNN and you saw Sony burning whoever was sitting in the Oval Office would have had to go do something to the North Koreans that was pretty obvious. Instead they got that much damage done or more with a cyber weapon that no one ever saw coming that they spent months planning out inside working inside the Sony computer systems. And when it happened what happened to them? President Obama blamed them for it one of the few times that a president has actually identified a country responsible for one of these things and imposed a few sanctions that I'd bet the North Koreans never felt among all the other sanctions they've had and that was pretty much it. So we have not

**Axelrod:** [00:42:44] Would we know if there were other means of retaliation? In other words if the U.S. were to launch its own cyber attack would we would you I mean I know you know everything about what's going on but would you would we know?

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**Sanger:** [00:42:57] We might not see it but one of the great things about being North Korea is you're pretty invulnerable to cyber attack. If your country is one of the least wired in the world then you have all of the advantages in attacking one of the most wired.

**Axelrod:** [00:43:11] Right there's nothing to attack.

**Sanger:** [00:43:12] There's nothing to attack. So there are other things you could go do. And in the case of Iran we did have big cyber plans and Alex Gibney made a movie based in part on Confront and Conceal and the story about Olympic games called Zero Days. And in the course of that he revealed another program called Nitrile Zeus which happened during the Obama administration which was a plan for how you would basically shut down Iran using cyber weapons if we got into a war with them. Fortunately we never had to do that. But it was an enormously complex big military plan to go go do this. So we're in a different world now. We are in a world in which countries that previously had nuclear weapons but couldn't really use them are now building up huge arsenals of cyber weapons and they have so far not broken out into a broad cyber war. But the moment is going to come. And the comparison here is sort of when the airplane was invented by Orville and Wilbur Wright and it took about six or seven years before somebody said hey I can put a machine gun on one of these things and then took another four or five years before we had World War One and the Red Baron and 35 36 years later we used an airplane combined with another technology to level Hiroshima. We're at kind of a World War One stage right now with cyber weapons.

**Axelrod:** [00:44:41] We're going to take another short break and we'll be right back with David Sanger.

**Axelrod:** [00:44:48] This this issue of cyber weaponry what is your sense of of the US's state of preparedness to participate in that struggle that you project is just a few years down the road? We know it happened with Russia.

**Sanger:** [00:45:09] Sure. So the offensive side of the U.S. is building up quite rapidly. The National Security Agency has gotten much more skilled and I think remains probably the most skillful player in the world although the Russians and the Chinese are right behind them.

**Axelrod:** [00:45:24] Although they got hacked recently.

**Sanger:** [00:45:28] They did get hacked. They got hacked dramatically by either hacked or things stolen from an insider. And the interesting part of this tale is that the North Korean weapon that was used cyber weapon that was used against Britain was based on vulnerabilities that had gotten stolen from the NSA which the NSA does not want to admit to. And that's part of the problem here we've wrapped such secrecy around cyber that we're not having sort of an open debate about how we want to use this the way we did on nuclear weapons. So we built up a U.S. cyber command which came about in good part from during the Obama administration and is now sort of ready just about ready to go off on its own. So we'll have you know we have Northern Command and we have a Central Command to the Middle East and we have space command and we will soon have a separate Cyber Command. We already do but it will be more independent. Our problem is the defense side. Almost all of the targets in the United States and in most major industrialized countries are in private hands. So how are you going to tell a company here's what you have to go do? And even if you could could the companies

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necessarily afford to go do that? You are only as defended as your weakest link right. So we've all seen things called implants basically malware that has been put inside our electric grid and our financial systems some days you discover it some days you don't. It would be nice if we all came to an agreement that we won't do this the sort of arms control agreement of cyber. The problem is the NSA would stop and say wait a minute we're putting this in systems around the world so that we can deal with our adversaries if we get into a bigger confrontation. Do you want to tell us that we can't have any implants in Russian systems or China systems? So we're in a very complex moment.

**Axelrod:** [00:47:33] I ran into a guy on a plane who I know who I hadn't seen for years who was in consulting and he was in the cyber cyber wing of consulting and it was about defending private entities and he said you know these are expensive propositions and it's pretty hard to get you know you have to sort of frighten the boards and CEOs to make the expenditure that is required to do the things you need to do and he said it was not it was not happening in a lot of instances. There's a lot there are a lot of people who are sort of you know happily ignorant about this because they just don't wanna they don't want to make the

**Sanger:** [00:48:19] Right now some boards are changing their mind. Target got hit with a criminal case. Right. Very sophisticated attack but a criminal one. And their CEO lost his job.

**Sanger:** [00:48:30] I mean it wasn't wasn't politically motivated.

**Sanger:** [00:48:33] Right. Wasn't done by the state. We don't know what led to who the attacker was yet or at least I don't know who the attacker was in the in the case of big credit rating agency that just got hit but their CEO lost his job as well. And it was entirely predictable. I mean they went through the usual process of denying that it had happened then telling you very little about it I remember saying to one of their crisis managers who was giving me excuses why we couldn't go in and talk to their executives about it I said you know I think in about two weeks if you keep with this the board is going to come to the conclusion that your chief executive is gone. And I was wrong. It was about 10 days.

**Axelrod:** [00:49:19] Well that may be persuasive. Yeah. So let me ask you as as a reporter as someone who covers this stuff you by necessity are writing about things that are secret that are classified you rely on sources. On Stuxnet you I don't know if you you've probably acknowledged this by now but it was a matter that was litigated matter General Cartwright who was the vice chair of the of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and very much part of that technology this technology initiative ended up getting pleading guilty and was pardoned for it. Is the environment did you find that the environment is getting tougher to in terms of finding people who are willing to cooperate in terms of leaks or are you operating as always under under the new administration?

**Sanger:** [00:50:31] It's tough with the hardest national security issues like the cyber issues. And we try to be pretty careful with those. I mean we're not just out publishing everything that we've learned. In the case of Stuxnet it's now pretty well revealed out of things that came out in FOIA and in the Cartwright case and he wasn't convicted he didn't plead guilty to leaking he pleaded guilty to lying to the FBI and then was pardoned by President Obama in President Obama's last days in office. But what's happening in these cases is the government is wrapping cyber in so much secrecy that we're unable to have a real debate about how vulnerable we are and what

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we're doing to other countries and the two are completely related. You can't set rules for one without the other. The environment for reporting is very hard. But it didn't stop us from reporting on another very big cyber case involving North Korea earlier this year. It was a program that President Obama had authorized or sped up in 2014 to go attack North Korea's missiles using cyber and electronic warfare techniques.

**Axelrod:** [00:51:44] And just generally the environment for reporting today as you look back over the course of your career there's obviously overt hostility. And I said earlier that every president complains about coverage every president complains about leaks the Obama administration was pretty vigorous about prosecuting.

**Sanger:** [00:52:07] The Obama administration prosecuted more suspected leak cases than I think all previous presidencies combined.

**Axelrod:** [00:52:13] So what about today and the the relationship between this administration and the news media and has it had a pernicious effect in any way on on news organizations?

**Sanger:** [00:52:28] Well I think it's got the potential to have a very pernicious effect. I mean having the president declare that you know the failing New York Times the lying New York Times the fake news CNN whatever his one of the day is is an effort to try to denigrate major news organizations so that he can go try to push the narrative that you're hearing from many alternative news organizations that have come up some of which are quite good and some which are quite partisan. What I worry about is this that we don't want to let the best news organizations in America and the news organizations that really make you recognize why the First Amendment means so much and I think we've all learned a lot in the past year about why it means much become part of what's called the resistance. We're not there to be the resistance to President Trump. That's not our role and if we're doing that we're making a big mistake we're playing right into his game right. We are there to report the news as aggressively as we can. And when you think back at the things that President Trump has argued were fake news disclosures by the New York Times The Washington Post many others about the investigation into the Russia case while there have been some mistakes made and there will always be mistakes made in the course of news reporting because we're all human and we're only as good as our sources and our judgment by and large the big stories that have been broken by The Times and The Post have got a very very high well over 90 percent accuracy rate. And what's that tell you that tells you there's good aggressive reporting going on. We're moving from an administration that declared in February there was no contact between their campaign and the Russians to by my count eight or nine members

**Axelrod:** [00:54:22] Yeah except for those nine guys. Yeah no I you know I think the point you raise is the one that's most concerning which is if an environment is created in which we so partisanize and polarize how people view news then even good reporting that is as Carl Bernstein was here at the university the other day would say the best obtainable version of the truth becomes suspect and people view news stories through that prism. That's a danger. It's a danger not just to the news media it's a danger to the republic.

**Sanger:** [00:55:03] And that divisions always been there. When I covered President Bush we'd go down to Crawford and I go running in the morning and I remember I would stop at a Starbucks and I'd pick up a New York Times off the rack there to go buy it with my cup of coffee

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and one day a lady tapped me on the shoulder and said do you read that? And I looked at her and I said Ma'am it's so much worse than you know I write some of this. And she said you really need to get with your people she said. But that existed long before Donald Trump came on. He has taken that wedge and made it all the greater and that worries me because I don't want to see the United States go back to the years of Adams and Jefferson where you had press that was directly linked to specific parties and candidates.

**Axelrod:** [00:55:54] Well it seems like that horse has left the barn to some degree.

**Sanger:** [00:55:57] It sure does.

**Axelrod:** [00:55:59] I'd be remiss if I let you go without talking about China and where China is in its development and what the relationship between the U.S. and China is today and what are the what's the future hold in terms of China's role in the world as the U.S. seems to be pulling back?

**Sanger:** [00:56:26] Well the Chinese can't believe their luck. I mean first they had a president in George W. Bush who after 9/11 and the United States was understandably on its heels went back and started us off on what became 16 years of nonstop war in a part of the world that the Chinese fundamentally weren't that considered that central. And that period of time was the time period of China's greatest growth. And when you go back and you read what she's Xi Jinping said during the 19th party Congress a week and a half ago where he really cemented his role he laid out a kind of historical tale that the Chinese very much believe. It starts in the 1830s or 40s during the worst of the Opium Wars where China felt like it was most under the heel of the West. A hundred years later in 1949 Mao declares China an independent country but a dead poor one. They are no longer poor. They aren't at our scale yet on military or economic power and certainly on the attractiveness of their system. But we're giving them many opportunities to make that case. And what he argued was that by 2049 not all that far away the hundredth anniversary of Mao's declaration of China's as the modern the modern Chinese state the country should emerge as the world's biggest economic and military power. And if we don't keep our eye on that ball even while we are dealing with Iran and North Korea and cyber weapons and the future of nuclear weapons and of course the huge domestic agenda here starting with inequality issues if we don't keep focused on that when historians go back and they write about what happened to the American polity that is going to be the big story. And that doesn't mean that China is on a straight run up. They've got all kinds of internal problems of their own. They've got to create jobs at a pace that is absolutely astounding and they right now have no ideological core to the country. Their appeal is all one of economic growth. And if that music stops playing the Chinese leadership is in deep trouble and they know it. So they've got a lot of weaknesses and vulnerabilities but we're not spending our time thinking about what areas we can really cooperate with them on other than North Korea and what areas we have to settle to say we're all going to grow together because if the plan is that we're going to contain China that one's over we're not containing them. They won't be contained and we couldn't do it if we wanted to. So then the question is do you make space in the international system to go deal with them? I'm not sure that I'm seeing very creative thinking about this within this administration.

**Axelrod:** [00:59:37] Presumably that's what the TPP was in part calculated to do.

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**Sanger:** [00:59:42] It was I mean the TPP people forget this China was not on the inside of it. It was on the outside. They could have joined it but they would have had to go change a lot to go do it. So walking away from that whatever you thought of the restrictions or not was a gift to the Chinese and now they're going off and picking off the members of the TPP and striking individual trade deals with them. So we keep handing them one victory after another and at some point we're going to learn how to design our national security strategy around a recognition that China is going to be a relatively equal power.

**Axelrod:** [01:00:25] It's an ironic thing because the president of course campaigned one of the most frequently repeated refrains of his candidacy was about getting tough with China. But as you mentioned earlier it's one thing to speak. You know it's the reverse of the Teddy Roosevelt thing. I mean he you can speak loudly but if you don't carry a big stick it's not very meaningful.

**Sanger:** [01:00:52] He does the same thing in Japan. I mean in Japan the other day when he was at the first stop on his trip he said we have to get to a point where the Japanese are producing cars to be sold in America in America. Well I went back and checked the Japanese are now producing three point four million cars in the United States. Depending on how you measure their content that's you know half to 70 percent of what they're selling in the United States. But that's a very different world than it was when I was a correspondent in Japan. And Toyota had just opened up its first plant here.

**Axelrod:** [01:01:28] David Sanger there's a it's a big world. We could talk for another hour. But It's so great to see you and thank you for for being here at the Institute of Politics.

**Sanger:** [01:01:38] Thanks it's a great program you've got here David. And I'm delighted to be here.

**Conclusion:** [01:01:44] 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](http://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](http://politics.UChicago.edu).