

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO INSTITUTE OF POLITICS & CNN PRESENT

THE AXE FILES

The Axe Files - Ep. 196: Pete Souza

Released November 30, 2017

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

Axelrod: [00:00:17] You know it's a cliché that a picture is worth a thousand words. In Pete Souza's case one of his pictures is worth ten thousand words really one of the great photo journalists on the planet. Pete's had a long distinguished career in photojournalism as well as the official photographer for two American presidents. He catalogued the Obama presidency. I travelled with him quite a bit during those years. Now he has a book out of 300 of the 1.9 million photos he took during those years that really tell the story of the administration. He came to the Institute of Politics at the University of Chicago to display and talk about that work. And we got a chance to sit down and talk about his extraordinary career and experiences chronicling history.

Axelrod: [00:01:12] Pete Souza my my old buddy it's good to see you. I knew you before you were a cult figure so I am glad I'm glad to see you. Thanks for being here and at the University of Chicago at the Institute of Politics. Looking forward to your presentation.

Souza: [00:01:29] Hey man I'm excited to be here.

Axelrod: [00:01:32] So I want to ask you a bunch of questions that I should have asked you all those times when we were sitting around various places waiting for something to happen or flying on planes and so on. But I know that you grew up in Massachusetts and I know that your family came originally from Portugal from the Azores or so. Tell me a little bit about how you grew up.

Souza: [00:01:59] So I grew up in. I was born in New Bedford which in the 1860s was actually the richest city in the world because of whaling. It was a big whaling port. But I grew up in South Dartmouth which is just I guess a suburb if you will of of New Bedford my mom was a nurse registered nurse. My dad was a boat mechanic. And both of them seemingly worked all the time. And it's funny you look back now on their life. My mom's 91. My dad is deceased but like my mom used to work the 11 p.m. to 7 a.m. shift when we were. Kids. And like I didn't think much of it then but when you think about that now she would get us off to school.

Axelrod: [00:02:58] You had brothers and sisters.

Souza: [00:03:00] Yeah I had a sister that was a couple of years older than me had a younger sister but I didn't really grow up with her. She was 12 years younger. So my mom would get us off to school in the morning after having just gotten back from work you know and get us off to school make us breakfast. And then she would take a nap and then be there when we got home from school at 3:00 3:30 and then she would make us dinner and get us to bed. And then she would leave the house at 10:30. And go work the overnight shift. And when you think about that now it's like my God how like that-- It's just it's almost disbelief that she actually functioned like that. You know most times just working at St. Luke's Hospital in New Bedford. But then she switched and worked at a nursing home and Dartmouth. And he talked about full circle. She now is she's she's doing this rehab because she just had you know somewhat of a health

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setback. So she's doing her a rehab at the same nursing home that she used to work at. Which is like crazy to think about.

Axelrod: [00:04:20] Well it also speaks to how deep roots in that community you know. Big Portuguese community in in Massachusetts?

Souza: [00:04:31] New Bedford was not so much Dartmouth and I was not a good student. I was probably like the least likely person to succeed in my high school.

Axelrod: [00:04:44] Were you officially voted that or do you think that was just a consensus thing.

Souza: [00:04:47] Well I think it was probably a consensus.

Axelrod: [00:04:51] And when did you when did this interest in photography begin.

Souza: [00:04:57] So I went to Boston University after my guidance counselor urged me not to apply there because he said I would never get in. And my grades weren't good enough. My S.A.T. scores were not. And like I you know just to spite him I applied anyway.

Axelrod: [00:05:16] And I had that same experience at the University of Chicago they told me don't apply. You won't get in. I did get in and then went and spent the next four years proving why I shouldn't have been admitted anyway.

Souza: [00:05:30] It's funny because I actually did better in college than I did in high school. So I went there because I was a huge sports fan. But I was not a good athlete. So I decided I was going to become a sports writer. That was my that was my goal. And so I applied to journalism school. It was called the school of public communication. It's now the College of Communication and the with the hopes of becoming a sportswriter and then in my junior year I took a photography class and it was almost probably the first time that after I had developed a roll of film and making the print and the dark room and that tray of developer and when that first image appeared I was hooked and I was like OK this is magic. I want to do this.

Axelrod: [00:06:23] You know we should say I think you know that there are a lot of people listening who are wondering what you mean when you say a roll of film and developing and and all of that.

Souza: [00:06:34] That was a part of the different era.

Axelrod: [00:06:37] Yeah. But you know it strikes me you I mean your photos are I mean you're a friend and we went on a journey together so I have some bias but your photos are spectacular. And you know there's that old thing about a picture is worth a thousand words. Pictures are really DO tell the story in ways that words only can partially tell.

Souza: [00:07:09] And I think you know photographs not only capturing a decisive moment but trying to authentically portray the mood and the emotion of what's taking place. I think it's sometimes. You can do that. Better with a photograph if the person look looking at the photograph feels as feels that same thing. Photography is subjective more so than words. And

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you've you've got to capture people's attention so they so they get to sort of feel what maybe you were trying to show.

Axelrod: [00:07:58] I watched you work quite a bit and I would watch you silently move around rooms because part of what your job was was to be as obtrusive as possible as you were photographing. You know often historic scenes sometimes not historic but meaningful. And so what are the calculations that you're making when you when you're when you're picking the spot you want to shoot from when you're framing up the photo. How what are the calculations that you go through to get to the point where you have a photo that actually says something?

Souza: [00:08:38] So hard to articulate that.

Axelrod: [00:08:41] It's why you're a photographer.

Souza: [00:08:43] It's it's it's you know I feel that even though I was a seasoned guy as they say during the Obama administration I felt that was a huge advantage in having had so many experiences in photography and photojournalism. That I was sort of unfazed by all the power that was before me that was really helpful to have the confidence to be there that I know and I needed to be there and that I had the trust of Barack Obama. To allow me to be there because he could have you know made it difficult for me and he didn't. And I think that. The fact that he had trusted me it made it hard for anyone else to question why I was in the room. And that was. That's that's the hardest thing to. Get over as you got to be you've got to be there you can't like write about it afterwards. You know a reporter can interview people in a room afterwards they don't they wouldn't have to be in the room.

Axelrod: [00:10:01] Right. But that moment is a moment.

Souza: [00:10:03] But a moment is a moment you've got to you've got to be there. So the fact that I had that trust from from President Obama that that's that meant everything in terms of like him moving around and trying to frame a picture and waiting for it anticipating the moment and clicking the camera at just the precise moment and what to include in the frame what not to include in the frame. That's like so hard to as I said articulate it's intuition in so many ways.

Axelrod: [00:10:36] You know I made a thousand thousands probably of ads and when I was doing that work as a political media person and when I would then try and teach about it. It was interesting to me because you slow you know you you show these ads and you realize there are about a you know a hundred different decision points about what images you use what music you use what type you use what you know and of course the words you use and you there's a reason for everything you do that you don't even think about after a while because it's instinctive. It's it's the product of a lot of experience. So on that note let me ask you you obviously you talk about being seasoned when you got to the Obama administration but you started somewhere. I mean you started at little newspapers in in Kansas. What was it that what did you what was it like then as kind of a raw rookie photographer what were the kinds of things that you were shooting then. What did you learn from that experience.

Souza: [00:11:52] The great thing about these papers especially small newspapers in Kansas is. That you're doing something different every day you're doing sometimes three four assignments so you learn to think quick react quick and still go into the darkroom as I said this is

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like in the old days and these are that are developed of film and make a brand and all that. So it was it was it was trial by fire and you know you learn by making mistakes. You know your name is under every picture in the newspaper. That's an incentive not to mess up. Right. You don't want to put a bad picture and have your name under it. So I was always trying to make a good picture for. For every assignment no matter how bad it was. And that's challenging you know especially sometimes in Kansas where you know if there's a dog that crosses the street at one o'clock you know that has a potential to be to page one photo you know because especially when you're in a town like Chanute, Kansas you know which we had a circulation of six thousand.

Axelrod: [00:13:09] I bet a lot of dog owners.

Souza: [00:13:11] A lot of dog owners. But it's also you I mean I have a I had a guy punch me out in Chanute, Kansas because I was taking pictures of his factory on fire that police suspected he had started himself to collect insurance money. I had a an irate father come and storm into the publisher's office because I had taken a picture of his son's automobile accident that killed someone that his son was responsible for. And you know why they lashed out at me. I don't know. It wasn't. I didn't kill the girl. The son did. But you know so things like that that you realize your photographs do have an impact even with a newspaper that only has a circulation of 60000.

Axelrod: [00:14:06] How'd you get up to Chicago. You went up to the Chicago Sun-Times in the 80s in fact I was working across the street at the time at the Tribune.

Souza: [00:14:14] I didn't I didn't know you but I'll bet if I went back through all my old negatives I'd see you in the background. You know some of the Harold Washington I had covered. So somebody recommended me for a job to the Sun-Times. It was just like I got a call one day from Henry Hill who is the director of photography at the Sun-Times and he called me. I want you to come interview and I was like well I work every day and he goes No we want to do some interviews so I flew up to Chicago and he hired me. And so I went from a six thousand circulation daily to a 600000 circulation.

Axelrod: [00:14:50] In a city where probably the dog crossing at one was not going to make the front page. So how was that adjustment from from from small town Kansas to Chicago.

Souza: [00:15:04] It was. It was I mean I have to say having lived in Boston during my college days I had been in a big city before so that part of it was OK but it was just the types of assignments you're getting which were you know much bigger you are covering major league sports and you were covering you know spot news that was big spot news and you're covering covering politics. I was there when Jane Byrne was the mayor and I was covering her a lot and covering the city council meetings and for Ed Vrdolyak.

Axelrod: [00:15:45] And like just people who don't know. I mean these were this was kind of a crazy period in Chicago political history Jane Byrne was this very interesting kind of sometimes wacky but tough woman who beat the Democratic organization of which she once was part and then had this very tumultuous reign of four years as mayor I covered city hall for for part of that.

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Souza: [00:16:17] So I covered the end of her mayorship and then the little bit of of Harold Washington you know who actually became the first African-American mayor of Chicago.

Axelrod: [00:16:30] Yeah. So tell me about them as characters to shoot these people.

Souza: [00:16:34] Well I think you described Byrne fairly well. It was you know we never had like access to Byrne when she was like doing the real people's business is always more public events that we're all kind of like.

Axelrod: [00:16:53] Or doing business to the people that people are.

Souza: [00:16:57] And then you know and Harold Washington was such a big personality and was--

Axelrod: [00:17:01] People always just ask me about him today because this is we're coming right up on the 30th anniversary of his untimely death he died at his desk at City Hall. I have never met a more balanced personality in politics in fact I often say you know I think that had he lived that he and Barack Obama would have been friends I think they would have been they would have had an interesting relationship sort of mentor mentee because Harold was such an interesting character but must have been incredibly fun to shoot.

Souza: [00:17:34] Yeah he was he was. And. And then you know almost prematurely I was offered a job in the Reagan White House.

Axelrod: [00:17:45] It was. How did that happen. First of all I should point out that you know you came up from Kansas and within a year and a half you were named the Illinois photographer of the year so you know obviously you took to this pretty quickly. But but but making the leap from the Chicago Sun-Times to the White House it was a pretty big leap ahead.

Souza: [00:18:07] It was totally totally unexpected. I actually turned it down at first.

Axelrod: [00:18:14] Why?

Souza: [00:18:15] Because I was. In a really good situation in Chicago. I really felt that I was growing as a photojournalist as working with you know John White.

Axelrod: [00:18:28] The legendary three time Pulitzer Prize Prize winner.

Souza: [00:18:32] And people like Richard Durk and Perry Rydell I mean just pillars of photojournalism. And so it's great to be on that staff and it is a fairly small community and the White House photo editor who had been at the Kansas City Star Carol Greenwald was following my career. And she was working for Michael Evans who was Reagan's chief photographer and they had an opening. They actually had to. Dismiss someone and said his opening in 1983 so the middle of Reagan's first term and just like call me up one day out of the blue and said we want you to apply for this job and I'm like you know A.) I was not really that into politics, B.) I was really not the biggest fan of Reagan but you know you hope that what you're doing is important for history. Right. Used to say journalism is the first draft of history and I'm thinking like OK here's a chance to actually really be involved in documenting history.

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Axelrod: [00:19:45] This is an important point because you you approach these assignments and you were in two White Houses which bracketed a career in journalism. You don't see that much of a separation between the two you see your job as the White House photographer as a as a form of photojournalism.

Souza: [00:20:06] It is. I mean you know there would be outrage by photojournalists to refer to me as a photo journalist in the White House. But I mean like I.

Axelrod: [00:20:14] Don't send your e-mails to Pete Souza by the way. All those photojournalists listening.

Souza: [00:20:19] I don't like when you when you're when you're at the White House as a White House photographer. It's not like you suddenly switch gears and you start using it you know like you start taking pictures differently or you're you change the style of of how you take. It's the same thing as the same thing. Yes I am on the government payroll and I.

Axelrod: [00:20:45] You know the question is I guess. Did you. Were there occasions when in either White House when there were photos that you thought were worthy of public consumption that a decision was made now we're not going to we're not sure.

Souza: [00:20:59] I mean during the Reagan administration it was eighty six or seven like this I forget when around Iran-Contra it was going on. And I mean I have some pictures that I really feel reflected the mood and the the White House would would not make them public. But when I published a book Reagan himself was OK with me making them publish was 93 93 because it was in the news after his administration is in restoration and you're putting things into context. It's not like you're you know putting them out at the time which I understand where the White House would not want to.

Axelrod: [00:21:51] Yeah we will take a short break and we'll be right back with Pete Souza.

Axelrod: [00:22:29] What was Ronald Reagan like you know in some way he--

Souza: [00:22:33] So we are not really taking a break. You're just saying that. Sorry--I'm just messin with you.

Axelrod: [00:22:39] I get it. We will have taken it we will have taken a break. Who knows we may be promoting your book in AD form and then in between it's just a little browser by that slot. But anyway tell it tell me what Reagan was like because that's still a mystery to this day. I mean he has kind of mythic status now in American politics and yet people very few people seem to really know what he was like.

Souza: [00:23:08] I wish I could tell you. I don't know that I know. If you talk to his son I mean I think he would say the same thing. Very difficult guy to get under his skin and really figure out what made him tick. I will say this you know the on Aspect of his personality that was simple similar to President Obama is he was very even tempered and it would it would take a lot to get him really riled up as it would. President Obama did get him. I did see him get riled up.

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Axelrod: [00:23:48] What kinds of things would rile him up?

Souza: [00:23:50] Oh. So I'll give you an example and you may have to give the background a little bit more. But there was this controversy when he accepted a visit from German Chancellor Kohl to go visit a cemetery in Bitburg. Yes. Which turns out. The graves of SS soldiers were buried there. Hitler's elite guard which when he accepted the invitation he didn't the White House didn't realize it and then it was before the visit was uncovered and he was beating everyone on the White House staff. Mrs. Reagan your friend Elie Wiesel as he was earlier was telling him he could not go and visit there. And he had this stubborn reaction which was another head of state asked me to do this visit unless he rescinds the invitation, I'm going now and you know he argued with his wife about which was an unusual at least in front of you. Yeah. And it was like his his. He just felt that strongly about it. And so stuff like that. And he would get P.O.ed when people try to.

Axelrod: [00:25:14] And probably angry as presidents get when they feel like there's been bad staff work or.

Souza: [00:25:20] Yeah yeah. And it's it's ironic the staff work is such that there is a pretty advanced team so there's that's a team that goes over months before to like sort of set the stage for the visit. And Mike Deaver was part of that pre advance team.

Axelrod: [00:25:38] Mike Deaver was the president's longtime aide who really was sort of the producer of the Reagan public production.

Souza: [00:25:47] So when he went to visit the cemetery it was winter and the cemetery was filled with snow. And they did not see the graves.

Axelrod: [00:25:55] I see so many of your photos of Reagan are with Nancy and they're very very warm I mean that's the place where you really see him light up. Their relationship seemed almost as if they lived in a bubble of their own.

Souza: [00:26:16] They were very close. It was not like a made for TV kind of relationship. It was a real relationship. They they they truly did love each other. They are each other's best friends. He was not happy when she was on a you know out of town on a foreign trip. He was not happy when he was on a long foreign trip without her. And he just he just like it was it was really a partnership. Now I will say that she never got involved with policy but she did very much involved with personnel as I think we all know. Now.

Axelrod: [00:27:02] Do you. You have not spoken once about Reagan. I should ask you first before I get to this. I mean you as a person. How did he treat you. How did he treat the people around him.

Axelrod: [00:27:20] I mean I've said this, before. I respected him as a person like he was it was a decent human being. I don't always agree. like with his politics per se. But if he had not been like a decent human being and treated people with respect I don't know that I could have stayed there. I mean I stayed there last of the last five and a half years of his administration I don't think I would have lasted that long if like I didn't respect him.

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Axelrod: [00:27:52] You were there for a long time and we talked about this you know Reagan it's obviously everyone now knows that he was older when he got there and he ultimately had to deal with Alzheimer's. And there was some question as to the end of his administration. You know what the state of his acuity was and you said that that the one thing you noticed was that he would take notes later in his administration.

Souza: [00:28:22] You remember me telling you that?

Axelrod: [00:28:23] I do remember everything you've ever told me. So that's scary except the things you asked me to forget. So tell me tell. Tell me about that.

Souza: [00:28:35] So that was one of the things that I knew was that he did keep a diary. I mean I had never seen it but I knew that he at the end of the day he would go up to the residence and he would write in his diary and sometimes it was short annotations you know which we saw when when my entire publisher published the. And he would get a pocket schedule much like Barack Obama did that he would keep in a suit coat. You know it's just a very what would you say like three inches wide by seven inches tall and it would have a schedule on it. And I noticed the last you know now I forget if it was six months or last year or so. He would be in and these meetings and he would occasionally write something on the back of a schedule. I had never seen him do that. And like the first 4 1/2 years I was there and I never asked him about it or you know but I'm an observer. That's my job as a photographer you're supposed to be an observer and I observe that. And my suspicion was that he was getting up to the residence at night and maybe was Not remembering details. Now like I could do that myself now and it would be helpful. Yeah I'm saying yes because you tend to even in your 50s and 60s you tend to start like you know remembering details. But you know it's sort of like why James Comey wrote down notes after he had been in and.

Axelrod: [00:30:21] He may have had a few other reasons for that.

Souza: [00:30:22] A few reasons. But but the point being that no I understand is trying to you know and whether that had anything to do with Alzheimer's or not I.

Axelrod: [00:30:31] Like some recognition that maybe he was ailing a little.

Souza: [00:30:35] I mean it was and if people don't know he was 77.

Axelrod: [00:30:38] Right. Which I don't think. The one thing that was really a revelation to me. And you knew this because you had been there was just how exacting just how tough being president the United States is. I mean you know it's sort of a cliché to say well that's the hardest job on the planet. But until you see it and what comes to that desk every single hour of every single day and through the night and into the weekends unrelentingly it is an unbelievable grind.

Souza: [00:31:11] And the thing that I was always Impressed with about amongst the many things but pressed with about I mean where were skip jumping up to the last administration when President Obama was on that same tone is on these long Asia trips and you know what those are like. Brutal. Yeah. And when you're the the guy that then has to go before all the cameras and answer questions and articulate policy and answer like for Barack Obama to do

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that with like having been on a trip for 10 days and not had good sleep and had these all day meetings and still never mess up I.

Axelrod: [00:32:02] Still would not send grouchy tweets and not 72 hours that's that was another feature of that. So you when you left the White House you went to work for my old paper for the Chicago Tribune and one of the one of your assignments was at Washington. But you you also covered war and including Afghanistan. That your first experience with with war coverage.

Souza: [00:32:37] Before I went to Afghanistan and right after 9/11 I did cover the refugee crisis in Kosovo and then when NATO finally crossed the border into Kosovo I was with the NATO troops and we you know we had a few close calls and Kosovo but nothing like Afghanistan.

Axelrod: [00:33:01] Well tell me about that and what that experience was like. I looked at some of your photos from from that period and I mean they're they're striking an incredible thing that there was one photo of a young child whose legs had been amputated. That was just wrenching but the faces of these children was the thing that struck me the most. But tell me what that experience was like.

Souza: [00:33:29] Yeah it was it was it was amazing and in some ways was one of the more fulfilling things that are done in my career because this was the first war where digital cameras were good enough. And even though there was very little electricity in Afghanistan with a satellite phone you could send images back. So so I was. My images were appearing in the Tribune every day and I was getting like hundreds of e-mails from readers. And I really felt that I was doing. Doing good work and people were seeing it and to pay attention to it. But it was it was a it was a very treacherous trip. I came in. This is when the Pakistan border was still closed and the U.S. It started an air campaign and before any U.S. troops were even on the ground I got into Afghanistan on horseback why I crossed the the river I forget the name of the river and from Tajikistan to the north mountain. But this is before that actually get into Afghanistan. I had to cross a river on this little raft and from Tajikistan from the north so that Got is above the Hindu Kush Mountains and then by horseback we went over the Hindu Kush Mountains and there was already even though it's October it was already winter there there was like three feet of snow. It was like below zero. Once the sun went down and you know it's like we all just froze to death on that mountain. And then we finally got into the Panjshir Valley and we're close to Kabul. And our timing was impeccable because four days after we got outside of Kabul the US started really dropping B-52 bombs and the Northern Alliance which were the soldiers that we were supporting with in Afghanistan fighting the Taliban. They made their final push into Kabul like four days after we got in the valley. So we were so lucky to be there when all that happened but there was like a lot of stats.

Axelrod: [00:36:03] That is the view of a journalist to say we were lucky to be there when it happened a lot of people would say gee this is not very lucky to be here when this happened.

Souza: [00:36:11] And I was lucky in that you know I remember one time as we were walking along the frontlines and you could hear clear crystal clear sniper bullets from the Taliban whistling over your head and you didn't you didn't know if it was two feet over your head or 20 feet over your head.

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Axelrod: [00:36:32] Yeah. But it was like a man of my lucky I'm lucky I'm lucky. I want to get to the the the the man who's the subject of the the great and wonderful collection of photos that you just released Obama an intimate portrait. That experience began in 2005. The Chicago Tribune decided that they were going to. And I remember this because I was on the Obama end of things when they proposed this they were going to follow him for a year as a new freshman senator in Washington on the theory that this guy was going places. You've said that that was your impression almost from the minute that you saw him. Is that is that is that fair to say?

Souza: [00:37:21] Yeah. You know I had I had never met him. I was one of the few people who hadn't seen the 2004 convention speech before I was traveling with John Kerry.

Axelrod: [00:37:32] It was good.

Souza: [00:37:33] I know it was good. I've since seen it but at the time and my only knowledge of him was the profile that the New Yorker had done. So that was my only like real sort of intimate knowledge about who this guy was. But two things struck me. One right away. I met him on his first day in the Senate. It was the first time I met him. And I'll show this picture tonight.

Axelrod: [00:38:02] You're going to be displaying these pictures.

Souza: [00:38:04] I'm going to show the university Yeah. And there's a couple of pictures from the Senate days just to get a start.

Axelrod: [00:38:09] That's a great picture of him running up the Senate steps.

Souza: [00:38:12] Yeah but the picture I'm referring to is. There's a picture of him with Sasha and Malia. That very first day. So I've only I've known the guy for hours. I'm tagging along with him. I'm not really talking to him much because that's not my job. He's you know it's kind of a ceremonial day and he goes into this little office.

Axelrod: [00:38:35] As a temporary space then.

Souza: [00:38:37] Yeah. And he had to he had to quickly eat a sandwich because it was the only chance he was going to eat. So he's eating this sandwich Sasha Malia with them. It's a very intimate picture. This you and I are about what four feet apart. I'm about this close to home and I'm making this really intimate picture and there's no recognition that I'm even there. That is just like so comfortable in his own skin and it's somehow it's translated to Sasha and Malia. We're not even paying attention to me. And I'm thinking like just because of that I'm thinking this guy's a good subject for a photographer because that's what you want. You don't want them to be self-conscious. You want to be able to capture whatever they're doing in a natural way. And I just saw that the first day. But then more than anything I saw how people were reacting to him and how he was able to connect with people whether he was talking to them or whether he was you know more doing the job not the grandstanding but the retail kind of politics where you just having a conversation with someone he connected that way and he connected when he was talking from the podium and in a way that was really impressive right away.

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Axelrod: [00:39:57] You also some connect with people overseas. You went on two trips with it. In that period 2005 2006 one to Russia and Eastern Europe and you guys actually got detained over there.

Souza: [00:40:14] I think we did get detained for like you know three or four hours and I forget the name of the town but it was in Russia and you know Jeff Zeleny was with me a reporter for The Tribune and now with CNN. How is he in it. And he. He somehow got a text message back to the editors in Chicago and we had CNN but of course on the TV and this little airport CNN International and you know nobody knew we were being detained. But Jeff got this text message out. And next thing we know we saw on the scroll bar you know two senators detained in Russia.

Axelrod: [00:40:54] The Senator from Indiana was travelling with you as well. The second trip was to Kenya. I should ask you about one in between were you with him when he went down to Katrina.

Souza: [00:41:03] I was not. I wish I had been.

Axelrod: [00:41:07] Yeah. That was that was an extraordinary I wasn't there either.

Souza: [00:41:10] Couldn't get the Tribune to pay for me to go. I really wanted it.

Axelrod: [00:41:15] I don't know which editor was responsible for that but I hope they're listening right now Kenya and Africa. The Africa trip in 2006 the summer of 2006 that was an extraordinary spectacle really.

Souza: [00:41:33] Well the we first went to South Africa and and he. Amongst other things went and visited Nelson Mandela's.

Axelrod: [00:41:42] So you shot some extraordinary photos of him in that cell on Robben Island.

Souza: [00:41:47] Yeah. That was amazing. And then he went to Kenya to go to the village where his grandmother lived. And that was crazy. I mean I don't was it because like the entire village pulled out. I remember actually before you went to his grandmother's village we were in I'm trying to think of the name of the town but he wanted to do a public AIDS test have his blood tested to courage others to encourage others to do it. And there were like thousands of people like there to watch. They are sitting in the trees. People are yelling. It was like crazy just crazy out-of-control excitement. Not there wasn't like violence--

Axelrod: [00:42:36] But it did speak to the fact that he was kind of a transcendent figure even as a young senator particularly because of his ties to Africa.

Souza: [00:42:48] And then when that then the the family joined him at Masa Mara and they went on a safari which was was incredible to you.

Axelrod: [00:43:06] You joined him you are-- Let me take a short break and we'll be right back with Pete Souza.

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Axelrod: [00:43:23] You join the administration from the beginning. Did you have any second thoughts about doing that I mean you had done this before. Now you were re-upping and you did it as a young man now you were seasoned as you said before.

Souza: [00:43:39] Well an I never had the desire to do it again. But I often thought to myself well if I ever do this again I want to be the you know the head guy and I want to really do it the way it's supposed to be done. And there is a guy who I had always admired I never met him. Yoshio Okamoto his nickname was Oakey and he was LBJ's photographer and he was probably the first official White House photographer to truly document a President for history. He had like access to everything. And so that was the approach I wanted to take. And I remember when Gibbs, Robert Gibbs, your friend and colleague was calling me as an emissary for the president elect and when he called me to offer me the job. I said Well I definitely want to do this but I need to have access to everything. And I remember he just said the president elect gets it knows it. I mean that was that was the essence of the conversation.

Axelrod: [00:44:52] It's funny you should mention the LBJ photos the LBJ administration because so many of those photos that came out of the White House really reflected the stress of those times of the Vietnam War of the civil rights battles and so on a lot of it was LBJ working and a lot of it was LBJ anguishing as he worked. And you captured a lot of that. President Obama came to office in very stressful times. Greatest economic crisis since the Great Depression. Couple two wars. And there was a lot of tension and a lot of your photos reflect that.

Souza: [00:45:37] And as soon as someone the other day that we the administration made a decision early on to make a lot of these pictures public right away you know with social media you know we used a flicker photo stream and.

Axelrod: [00:45:55] First administration. First time it was available.

Souza: [00:45:57] Right. I guess it was never said was available and I suspect that no matter who had been president who had been the photographer you know they say a different president a different photographer would have would have done the same thing. But the we were trying to be authentic. So a lot of the pictures especially in 2009 2010 reflected that as you call it anguish and were subsequently and years to come used out of context and political ads which is the risk that you take when you release pictures like that. Yeah.

Axelrod: [00:46:33] Yeah. There were there were there were moments of triumph two and one I love is him walking off the podium. He went to Baltimore to speak to the Republican House Caucus.

Souza: [00:46:47] I love that picture.

Axelrod: [00:46:47] And he and it was broadcast because we asked for it to be broadcast and he had essentially a live debate over health care with the Republican caucus. And he's leaving and knowing.

Souza: [00:47:01] He's just clean their clocks and he knew it.

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Axelrod: [00:47:03] And you can see on his face and he's brushing past a very stoic Mike Pence. Yeah.

Souza: [00:47:11] I love that picture because that one to me accurately reflected what had just happen where I think the Republicans were stunned that this guy knew a hell of a lot more about the health care bill and health care in general than all of them put together.

Axelrod: [00:47:29] I don't think he was ever invited back. Certainly not with live TV not with cameras. Maybe the most famous photo you ever shot was in May of 2011. On the day of the bin Laden raid. And I think people have seen that photo. But describe that photo the way you see it through the way you saw it through your lens and and the way you saw the moment.

Souza: [00:48:03] As you know the situation room is comprised of three conference rooms. Presidents always in the big room. But the communications link set up for this raid were in this was in this little tiny conference room across the hall. So everybody just like piled in there and they're really jammed in in this room. And the president's not even seated at the head of the table because there was a brigadier general on a laptop who was in direct communication with I believe Admiral McRaven in Afghanistan. And so he was ready to give up his chair for President Obama and presidents like no you stay right where you are I'll just pull up a chair next to you but so everyone is monitoring this raid as it's happening for 40 minutes. Usually in a situation room meeting there's lots of discussion back and forth. The president's talking secretary of state talking there. You know sometimes there's arguments sometimes as policy differences. They're hashing it all out. For 40 minutes, there was no discussion there was observation including by me and my. They were observing what was taking place on the screen and I was observing them watching it and I think if you look at all those tense faces you see the tension that was in that room. And one of the reasons why is you have the most powerful people in the federal government all jammed into this room and they're essentially powerless. They cannot affect in any way the outcome of what they're watching. It's up to those guys on the ground. And I think it was somewhat of a you know a helpless feeling because you know you want to you want to help in some way but you can't. They've already made their decision in the days and weeks before and now they're just there.

Axelrod: [00:50:08] Now was that moment that you shot that photo was that during the period of time when you when the helicopter had crashed or was it after that.

Souza: [00:50:19] It was it was not a helicopter crash. I can't tell you exactly when it was. But in looking at that line by line of the mission itself and one of the good things about a digital camera is everything like that. So it was towards the end of the mission and what I'm pretty sure it was when the special forces were inside the house and there was no direct link toys going on. And so I think that they were all waiting for them to come out of the House hopefully all intact because like you know this thing could have gone really wrong. I mean there are a helicopter crash right away and an Admiral McRaven being the genius that he was had backup helicopters nearby and the pilot being the genius pilot that he was crash that helicopter in a way that no one got hurt which is amazing when you think about it. So but it could have gone it could get really bad. That mission as sometimes happens.

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Axelrod: [00:51:29] What incredible thing too. I mean there probably isn't anybody else who witnessed as much history other than the president himself. Then you.

Souza: [00:51:42] I've seen a lot.

Axelrod: [00:51:44] Yeah. The you some of the photos that were most impactful were not these big historic occasions but poignant ones like the photo which I have in my office of the little boy touching the president's hair in the Oval Office. Explain that photo. And and what you were thinking when you when you took it.

Souza: [00:52:11] So a little boy was Jacob in Philadelphia, is four years old at the time. His dad was a foreign service worker who had nonpolitical work during the Bush administration carried over to Obama had come in with his family into the Oval Office for a family photo with the president standing in front of a desk. They finished the photo. The mom says Mr. President, Jacob has a question for you and Jacob you know imagine being four years old talking to the President of the United States so it's kind of more of a whisper. You know his friends said his hair is like his own. The president bends over and says go ahead and touch it and you have this little 4 year old boy. Touching the head feeling the head of the United States who's bending over at the waist in front of them. And Jacob's eyes are just glued right to the president's head as he's touching him. And it was I shot one frame of that. It happened so fast it was unexpected. And I don't even know for sure that I had a picture until later that night. And I think it later resonated with so many so many people mostly because I imagine people could imagine a four year old African-American kid, Touching the head of the president United States who looks like him. Yeah. And I think that resonates.

Axelrod: [00:53:48] You talk about a picture that says everything.

Souza: [00:53:50] It does. But you know here's the thing Axe. This this also tells you a lot about the United States. What is it that that at the behest of a 4 year old kid that he would bend over like that and let this kid just touch his head.

Axelrod: [00:54:06] Yeah I think you know I think it's fair to say that the current president is unlikely to bend over and ask a 4 year old to touch his hair. I don't think that's going to happen. I'm I'm just I'm just I'm just guessing. Another one that I really love that's in your in your collection is him walking through it looks like it's in hallway next door and giving a fist pump to a janitor as he walked by which I think is not those kinds of exchanges weren't that extraordinary because we've seen them you know whenever he traveled they always went through the bowels of a hotel and there were always people hotel workers waiting and he would stop. But that's another thing that people don't expect.

Souza: [00:54:58] No. And we were walking either to or from an event in the Old Executive Office Building which is within the White House complex. Here's here's a funny anecdote about that picture. The guy's name is Larry Lipscombe and I have had a photo editor who would look through every single picture that I took. And at the time it was Alice Cooper. She was there for the first two and a half years I think and she was looking at my take that day every single frame and she came across this picture and she said this is the guy that takes out our trash. You know that comes to our office and takes out our trash. And it struck her that she was living history to a different kind of way. And that picture became emotional for her that she knew this guy.

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Axelrod: [00:55:54] Yeah. You know those of us who worked with the president and were around those years know that you were you were more than his photographer you were a companion you were with him a lot. You were in his card playing quartet on these long plane rides playing spades probably more spades than you actually wanted to play. Pete's nodding right now hoping the president isn't listening to the podcast but how did you what changes did you see in him over the course of those eight years.

Souza: [00:56:36] I have to say that from the time that I knew him as a United States senator until January 20th of this past year and beyond the core character of the man has not changed. I really believe that. I mean I think he always was I was thinking about what's the right thing to do for, for people you know and I think I got to say that I wonder if anyone that wants to be president maybe should be a community organizer for a couple of years as a requirement as a prerequisite because I think that's one way he was able to. I don't think he ever lost the connection that he had with those people in Chicago. And I think that you know the same way that Joe Biden never lost a connection he had with people in Scranton. I think that's that's a that's a good a good background to have when you're at the highest levels of government. Don't you think?

Axelrod: [00:57:53] Yeah. Well I think yeah and I think the fact that the truth is he wasn't that removed from his own working class journey when he became a United States senator and then president I mean he had just paid off his student loans when when he went to the went to the Senate I think there's something to be said for that as well. What I noticed was you know I knew him for years before he became a senator a president. And I tell everyone that the night he became the night he was elected president I went into his suite with Robert Gibbs and David Plouffe and you could almost see the sort of weight of the responsibility descend on his shoulders. And I see him now.

Souza: [00:58:43] And that weight is gone.

Axelrod: [00:58:45] It's sort of remarkable.

Souza: [00:58:46] Yeah it's it's I've been with him a couple times. I was at the summit with him and then I went down to Texas for that benefit concert for hurricane victims so I flew on his plane. I asked if I could go because I thought you know this might be the last time all five formers are together. That from a historical standpoint that photographs of the you know those on a plane for you know 2 half hours going down 2 1/2 hours going back and you could see that the weight was gone and the weight of everything that you do and say is on your shoulders no matter what happens in the country and in the world it affects you when you're in the United States.

Axelrod: [00:59:33] Now you become I joked at the beginning but I'm only I'm only half kidding you're kind of a cult figure. Now in part because of your Instagram site you've been posting pictures from the Obama years during the during those first 10 months 11 months of the Trump administration and they all seem to have an unspoken message. So tell me tell me what you have in mind here.

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Souza: [01:00:00] I don't have anything in mind. It's like. People think I'm like you know I had some grand strategy. I didn't I just I almost began accidentally. And the the one thing that I was trying to maintain is: Being as subtle as I could and not being like you know the Pod save America guys.

Axelrod: [01:00:31] Our old buddies.

Souza: [01:00:32] And just you know reminding folks about what the last administration was like and to do it in a way as I say was was respectful and playful at times and let it speak for itself. I mean I had all these people wanting to interview me about this. The last you know six or eight months and I never did one interview because I thought that would make it less effective. Matter of fact early on people started writing stories even though I wouldn't be interviewed and I remember the first time I saw the headline you know Obama a photographer throw shade at Trump. I had to like actually look up what throw shade.

Axelrod: [01:01:19] You know you clearly are in a Pod save America.

Souza: [01:01:21] No. You know so. But like look compared to. I mean I think I'm so subtle and respectful on Instagram especially when you compare it to What some people write on Twitter you know.

Axelrod: [01:01:41] Why are you looking at me man?

Souza: [01:01:43] Nothing. I'm not looking at you.

Axelrod: [01:01:44] Let me just ask as we close.

Souza: [01:01:46] I'm not talking about you Axe.

Axelrod: [01:01:48] What's next for you? I mean obviously right now you're traveling with this book and again Obama an intimate portrait I mean I'm biased and I confess it but it really is an emotional experience to go through these photos and a great look at history as well as it at the man. But now what. I always you know the question is always like what are you going to do to match this.

Souza: [01:02:21] Man you're putting that kind of pressure on me.

Axelrod: [01:02:22] Yeah I was like No hit the impossible question on the way out the door.

Souza: [01:02:26] Yeah I mean I got a lot of thoughts swirling around in my head and I got to I got to figure that out. I mean this this year just getting this book together producing it getting it designed and printed the way I want it. And so this has been this has been a book year as I say and I haven't done that much photography. I did I did something for Netflix with Kevin Spacey of all people in promotion of the new season of House of Cards I did something with my friend Brandi Carlile who's a musician in Seattle and I did. I did some pictures for her upcoming record and I've done a couple of other assignments like that. But I got to I got to figure out what my next big project is.

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Axelrod: [01:03:19] Well I said I have to tell you that your photos your first one of your photos of Bruce Springsteen that you shot from the mash pit on your. I think you may have done on your phone I'm not sure. Not on your phone. But it wasn't. You didn't have your--

Souza: [01:03:36] You know I had like you know a marvelous almost a point and shoot with me. Yeah.

Axelrod: [01:03:42] But I was like fantastic photo. You are you're you're really really one of the great photographers of our time and is as good a man so it's been great too to know you and it's been great to talk to you.

Souza: [01:03:59] Well thanks for having me. I appreciate it very much. And I'm looking forward to tonight's event.

[01:04:06] Thank you for listening to the AXE Files part of the CNN Podcast Network for more episodes of The AXE-Files visit [CNN.com slash podcast](http://CNN.com/slash/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.