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The Axe Files - Ep. 197: Tom Hanks (TV)

Released December 2, 2017

DAVID AXELROD: So I'm eager, I will reference it, I'm eager to see The Post.

TOM HANKS: Well, it's just out, you know, they're literally just --

(CROSSTALK)

AXELROD: Yeah. They screened it last night, I think --

HANKS: Yeah, there's a screening tonight and -- it's odd to be in a movie that -- I'm in about half the movie. So when I get to see it, you know, there's my stuff. But then you get to see all the rest of the movie. It's like seeing it -- the screen [ph] -- it's like seeing a movie. It's not like seeing your own.

AXELROD: Yeah.

HANKS: And -- I think it's a good movie. I mean, it's -- it's serious.

AXELROD: It's powerful. At this moment.

(CROSSTALK)

HANKS: Yeah, okay, we can talk about (INAUDIBLE) --

(TECHNICAL DISCUSSION)

AXELROD: I'm into promoting your products.

HANKS: Oh, thank you very much. Yes.

AXELROD: I really enjoyed (INAUDIBLE) --

HANKS: Oh, thank you.

AXELROD: I really did. I thought the -- I started reading it out of obligation because we were going to do this. And I really, really enjoyed it.

HANKS: I didn't want it -- I didn't want it to be a chore for anybody, including the... including the people who --

AXELROD: No, no, no. It's really, really fun. I'm impressed by it.

HANKS: Oh, thanks. It's interesting having a book out because -- when you have a movie out, there's a whole industry whose job it is to cover the movie that's out.

AXELROD: Right.

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO INSTITUTE OF POLITICS & CNN PRESENT

THE AXE FILES

HANKS: They just have to.

AXELROD: Right.

HANKS: It's what they get paid to do. But with a book, they have to read it and want to talk to you -- with this -- it really alters the dynamic of giving an interview about -- it's not just, so why lie, you know -- what? You know, that they -- they know that they're completely disinterested in your movie when they say, "Um, so what was it about this film that attracted you?"

(LAUGHTER)

Say, hey, oh, I see, you hate --

(LAUGHTER)

But it's not that with the book. So where do you do this from? Do you do this from where you --

(CROSSTALK)

AXELROD: Well, we just travel. So this is the seventh one. We --

HANKS: Who else have you done?

AXELROD: We've done -- John McCain, John Lewis. Ah, James Baker.

HANKS: Wow.

AXELROD: Yeah, we've had some good guests. Steve Kerr. We did Nancy Pelosi, which was interesting. She -- she passed (INAUDIBLE).

HANKS: Well, I'd think she'd have to be. Don't you?

AXELROD: Oh, yeah. Well, I --

HANKS: I love her husband. Her husband always strikes me that -- strikes me as that, you know, that mafia guy -- I'm in parking lots.

AXELROD: (LAUGHS) Exactly. Exactly. Well, he's done well in parking lots, I'll tell you that.

HANKS: He has. I'm joking, but -- (LAUGHS)

AXELROD: Well, he's got to be pretty tolerant because she's 110 percent -- but we wouldn't have gotten the Affordable Care Act done without her and she's tough.

HANKS: Are you still -- do you still enjoy being plugged into the Washington political environment?

AXELROD: You know, I don't miss being there, at all. Not at all. It was the greatest experience

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THE AXE FILES

ever, to spend a couple of years there. It was also a great experience to come home to the real world. You do lose your sense of touch there. You know, Gary Hart once told me Washington's the last to get the news and I really learned to understand it when I was there. There's a whole different conversation and -- and it's a little like Hollywood, I think. I'm going to ask you about that.

HANKS: It's a rarified air that goes on that --

AXELROD: Well, and everybody inhales, you know.

HANKS: Oh, everybody -- oh, they're all sucking on the same balloon, yes.

AXELROD: And you know, lots of really smart, talented people -- kneecapping other people to try and get ahead and you know -- it would be familiar to you. I've (INAUDIBLE) Washington and (CROSSTALK) to Hollywood -- it's the same --

HANKS: Well, they've always said -- politics is show biz for ugly people.

AXELROD: Yeah, exactly. That's why I felt so comfortable. (LAUGHS)

HANKS: Yeah. It was great -- there was a thing on PBS a long time ago, it was called Middletown. It was about Muncie, Indiana and one of them was about the, the race, the race for mayor in Muncie, Indiana. And the guy, the non -- the non-politician was coached by his Republican team, just says, look (INAUDIBLE) -- always talk about leadership. Every problem can be solved by leadership. Well, I think the real problem is --

(LAUGHTER)

-- a lack of leadership. Leadership, leadership, leadership, leadership. And the other guy, who ended up losing, he was just, aw, come on, man, this is just show biz for ugly people.

(LAUGHTER)

And it was fun. It's fun! And so they got the, they got the mayor of Muncie, I guess, that they deserved. But it's like, it would be an example of it is like, as average a city as you're going to find. You know? Not even Indianapolis, it's Muncie. You know. It's not Kansas City, it's Muncie. It's not St. Louis, it's Muncie. It's kind of like AA-town, which, ah, you know, it's still a great place to raise your kids. You can spend your life there.

AXELROD: I used to do this -- when I started out -- the Midwestern -- Evansville, Indiana.

HANKS: I did some time in Evansville. That was A League of Their Own. That's where we shot that.

(CROSSTALK)

AXELROD: -- staying down there.

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THE AXE FILES

HANKS: Yeah, it was heavenly. We loved it. It was great.

AXELROD: I enjoyed -- I like going to these little towns and -- figure them out. Local politics is fun because it actually means something. I mean, that they do actually touches people's lives. And it makes much more -- dynamic.

HANKS: Did you hear about the town, also in Indiana, that they were -- in order to take care of traffic and air quality, they just, they just started replacing street lights with traffic circles and the results have been extraordinary. I mean, literally, they took out something like 32 street light intersections and put in 32 traffic circles. And the commuters --

(CROSSTALK)

-- left and it's made a huge difference, because cars aren't just sitting idling and whatnot.

AXELROD: That's kind of the essence of what government should be. You got a problem, the community needs to solve it because like the market's not going to solve these problems. You know, I like that, but -- not as fun -- you asked me about Washington, I mean, a terrible place to be now. For reasons that should be apparent. But -- you know, it's just a very ugly, ugly scene.

HANKS: All right. What are you doing here? Oh, thank you. Fix me. Nothing wrong with that.

(TECHNICAL DISCUSSION)

AXELROD: So we're about to start. And they'll have an intro before. Have you ever been on television before?

HANKS: I've done a couple times. I'm just worried about -- what is your theme music like? Is it dramatic theme music? Is there a lot of drums and the French horns? Or is it the kind of jazz --

(CROSSTALK)

AXELROD: It's a rip-off from Apollo 13.

HANKS: Oh, bah-bah-pah, oh, it's so noble, it's the noble thing, that's good.

(TECHNICAL DISCUSSION)

AXELROD: [13:20] Tom Hanks, great to be with you. I really -- what's interesting to me is how does, how you do you become Tom Hanks? How does Tom Hanks become Tom Hanks? Because I did a little reading about your life. I mean, people look at you; you're warm, you're -- you're garrulous. You're kind of an American icon and they say, well, he must have grown up with Ward and June Cleaver.

(LAUGHTER)

I mean, he must be like Wally and the Beaver. Your childhood wasn't like that.

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THE AXE FILES

HANKS: No, my -- we -- my parents -- the joke is they pioneered the marriage dissolution laws for the state of California, you know. My dad -- Janet, Amos and Zsa Zsa Gabor all had a lot of divorces between them --

(LAUGHTER)

Between them. But I -- I can't -- it's funny, well, I have three siblings. I'm the third kid of four and we all have different takes on, you know, ah, the environment that we grew up in. And mine was is that -- other than it being confusing sometimes, and otherwise it being, having a, you know, parents who weren't anxious to tell us what was going on the world -- I didn't -- I kind of thought it was an adventure. Or I thought, you know, we'd moved -- I had 10 different address - - I had 10 different homes by the time I was 10 years old and I thought --

AXELROD: That is confusing.

HANKS: Yeah. Yeah, but I thought it was kind of cool. I lived in a -- you know, I had a bunch of step-siblings. We lived in apartments; we lived almost like on quasi farms. We lived in the outskirts of town; we lived in the middle of towns.

AXELROD: Different schools?

HANKS: Yeah, yeah. I went to, you know, I went to -- one kindergarten, a first grade, then a second grade, then a third, then a third, fourth, fifth -- yeah, but I wasn't intimidated. I guess a Type A garrulous personality, as you say, I -- I was able to size up what was going on pretty quick and some degree of, you know, a good sense of humor and some degree of confidence and a great amount of adopted independence, I think. If -- if I was going to say there was a problem there, I -- I traveled emotionally light. You know, I didn't, I didn't take a lot of the burdens -- of that confusion along with me.

AXELROD: The older kids maybe did a little more --

HANKS: Well, I think just because they were older and they had experienced, experienced more of it, but by the, you know, by the time I was 10 I thought it was kind of cool to have lived in as many different places -- that I lived in and then, you know, it's funny, we lived in one house until I was 14, so 10 to 14 and that was the longest I had lived anywhere, (LAUGHS) you know, four years in one place. And then we started moving again every year.

AXELROD: I read somewhere you described yourself in school as a nerd, a spaz, painfully shy.

HANKS: Well, I was --

AXELROD: Those aren't words that people associate with you.

HANKS: That's what I said?

AXELROD: Yes.

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THE AXE FILES

HANKS: I was -- there's a -- I was at combat, I think, with the reality of the home environment. I was -- other than this brief period of time when we lived -- my dad was not married and it was just the four of us, my dad, my older brother, my older sister.

AXELROD: Your dad was a cook.

HANKS: He was in the restaurant business, yeah, in the -- he was a chef, cook, ran the place, bought at times. Outside for two and a half years where we sort of lived alone, I was not necessarily anxious to get home. Because there was an unspoken tension in the house. It was always something that was not being said, like how long we're going to live there or you know, how good, you know, Dad and his wife are (LAUGHS) getting along. So I think the combat I had was, was a liveliness and a distraction -- that was built on, you know, hanging out with other people and you know, staying -- being busy and sort of like being in the entertainment business without realizing I was in the entertainment business.

AXELROD: Well, when did you realize that you wanted to entertain? When did the acting bug -
-

HANKS: I was always -- I was always a guy who shouted out wisecracks during the slide show, you know, at school. But when I was in -- I was in high school and -- had that, well, what are you going to do? What do you take in high school? Biology? Government? World history? What do you do? I ran the track team for a while, with absolutely no enthusiasm whatsoever. But then when a friend of mine was in the school play and I -- but I saw him do this and I just said, what's this racket? You're telling me, we can come and do this here? I thought it was only for Parks Department stuff, or maybe you know, in the church group you might put on, you know, skits and stuff like that. And when I realized it was a -- but I found out -- there was a classroom that had a stage in it and you could take more than one class and it wasn't babysitting.

We had the -- I've spoken about my teacher there, a guy named Rawley Farnsworth, who was a man of the theater and that's what we did. So discovering that was, well, this was just more fun than fun is. Beats the hell out of every other class I'm taking. It was actually a kind of a lot like a class in which the same skills were required of it than was to hang around at lunchtime and you know, and try to entertain the girls.

AXELROD: And where about, in particular, what about acting? I mean, it seems to me, I mean I admire -- you're the best of the best. But anyone who can inhabit a character and become someone else --

HANKS: Well, I don't -- I always do it purely on instinct, but the instinct was to throw myself into it totally. When -- when I was in a play or when I was performing, it -- it took up every moment of my day and every, every brain cell. I was always thinking about what I was going to do or how, what -- you know, between learning the lines and the excitement of just being there and getting ready to go on. It was -- I think there are people who are actors and there are people who are not and never will be. I just am one of those that was not, was not self-conscious about it, was really sort of like champing at the bit in order to go, be a part of something.

AXELROD: What about the reaction to it? Did you -- there must have been some thrill

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO INSTITUTE OF POLITICS & CNN PRESENT

THE AXE FILES

associated with being entertain -- entertaining people.

HANKS: Well, there was -- there was just the excitement of knowing that anybody had shown up specifically to watch what you are in -- and that division between the proscenium and the audience was very powerful -- whether they liked you or not. I mean, if they laugh, you know -- I was in like South Pacific or something like that, that was really exciting. But I also had the same exact thrill of when I was a stage manager of the shows, because we were a part of this magic thing that was hidden from them, but you could hear them; you could feel the heat of an audience. You could actually feel the focus of their eyeballs on you and if, if they started reacting in a way to something that you were doing, well, that's just, David, that's crack cocaine, that's crack cocaine.

AXELROD: Did you -- and you must have found a community then with people who you were acting with, working with, crews --

HANKS: I would say I found it -- I found the tribe of -- that I think every person needs to belong to, that every person needs to seek out. There's, you know, there were people at church that were great. There were people that were, you know, populated the individual classes. There were people that I got along with, but I, I felt as though I had, you know, a secret tattoo or you know, the shared, same DNA with the people that were in the drama department and when I went off to college, I didn't realize that even there -- I thought there was some other test or rules; I didn't realize that the theater or dramatics was a discipline that you could pursue. I thought it was just something you instinctively did, you know, to hang out with funny people and have a gas. And after, you know, three years of doing that, I realized, oh, I can major in this and I might be able to get a job as a follow spot operator or as a stage carpenter or as a stage manager.

AXELROD: And that's kind of how you started out, right?

HANKS: That's right.

AXELROD: When you were in Ohio, you were really crew.

HANKS: That -- we were hired in order to change the sets over and we were -- those of us who were paid made about 48 bucks a week. Those of us who were not paid, thank you very much, did it for the professional experience. Because it was professional actors and we were a rotating rep. And we were given parts, small parts in, you know, you carried a spear or I played Reynaldo in Hamlet, which is a part that's always cut, for good reason. But in the course of that, you know, there were some people who were given more responsibilities and between the company saving money by paying an intern 50 bucks a week as opposed to paying an Equity actor, you know, \$250 a week, that was the difference between having the experience and not. And I did that, I did that for --

AXELROD: You already were married. You had a kid at that point.

HANKS: I was not married, but yeah, my son had been born and -- for the three years, by the time we got married, he was two and I had made the move -- I had a card in my wallet that said I was a professional actor. And the great friends I had, other members of the tribe said, you don't go back to Sacramento, California. You go to New York. Well, shouldn't I go to

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THE AXE FILES

Minneapolis? No. Can I go to Kansas? No. Should I go to Chicago? No one here is from Chicago. You come to New York and that's what I did and I had a kid and I had -- we got married when I, when I was there and it was horrifying and scary. But you make your peace with that kind of -- New York was a very different place in 1977, '78. You make your peace with that.

AXELROD: That was in Son of Sam times there.

HANKS: We had that. It was kind of like walking into Scorsese's Taxi Driver --

(LAUGHTER)

Is what it was. But I viewed it as, you know, I think as you're figuring out that stuff, you have these vibrant -- you were talking about, you know, when you were doing, you know, local elections, you can't imagine doing anything else. And the combat, the battle becomes in the daily, the daily seeking of purchase, you know. There were days you woke up, you had nothing to do. Nothing. There were no auditions. Maybe you could get together --

(CROSSTALK)

AXELROD: Did you have to work on other stuff to, just to support yourself?

HANKS: No. Luckily I had made just enough cash, money, in order to pay enough of the rent and I -- because I was a professional actor, I was on unemployment, so I had 25 weeks of salary and 25 weeks of minimum unemployment payment and that was just enough to eek out a living.

AXELROD: Now, was there any point where you just said, damn, I'm good?

HANKS: No.

AXELROD: I can really do this.

HANKS: No. Here's what I thought. And we actually talked about this. All of us young, you know, Turks that were out doing it at the same time. I said, look, we are as good as 50 percent of the people -- no, excuse me. Let's go back. This is what we said. We said we are better than 50 percent of the people in the auditions, just better. That's, that's a level of cockiness that goes on. They're fine, they're good -- we're better. I am just as good as 40 percent of the people. Just as good. I can't touch the remaining 10 percent because they're geniuses (LAUGHS) and they just do stuff, they're on another astral plane. So the odds --

AXELROD: Were there people that you remember from that time, who were in that category, who went on to become --

HANKS: Ah, everybody who had a job. (LAUGHS) You know, that I didn't have. No, because I didn't view myself as being in competition with the likes of them. Because they had the jobs. And they didn't even have to audition. It was a literally, it was like an odds process. So 50 percent -- so the odds are better if you think you're better than 50 percent. That's

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THE AXE FILES

confidence. The odds are still kind of in your favor if you think you're as good as the 40 percent. So timing ended up being everything. They need a guy my age with my voice and my hair and my eyes and my, my build. If they need that, I've got, really, I've got better than 40 percent --

(CROSSTALK)

AXELROD: And this is all auditions for stage roles.

HANKS: Stage roles -- I never could get -- I auditioned for one Maxwell House Coffee commercial, but I didn't know what the process was. So they kept saying, slate it. I'm sorry? Slate it.

(LAUGHTER)

What? Slate? I don't understand. Slate what? Say your name. I remember that, come, oh, all right. I didn't get that job. No, this was --

(CROSSTALK)

AXELROD: So you weren't thinking that, you know, some day I'm going to be like a mega movie star.

HANKS: God, no. I was hoping some day I could, you know, move into a better crappy apartment. That's all you're going for. No. I would say the -- the thing I had in my pocket that -- was an advantage was complete obliviousness to any other possibility other than, gee, I hope I can get this job doing -- High Button Shoes at the Zanesville Playhouse over the summertime. Because it's going to pay close to 280 bucks a week. I can make that, I can stretch that.

AXELROD: I want to ask you about another passion that you developed in your childhood. You just released a book, a great book of short stories called *Uncommon Type*, there is a story in that book called *The Past is Important to Us* --

HANKS: Oh, yeah.

AXELROD: Which is a great, great book about time travel. But it struck me, just thinking about your career and your story, that the past is important to you. That you are very focused on history and you know, you, obviously you're very focused on the history of World War II --

(CROSSTALK)

HANKS: I've done a lot --

AXELROD: And the history of the '60s. What attracted you to that? When did you start down that --

HANKS: When I started reading for pleasure -- I didn't know if it's proper to say this, but I had

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THE AXE FILES

a very vivid imagination in all other respects of school, pursuit. I was, you know, I was in the theater, I was quote/unquote "an actor". That is a lot of making things up, that have to be rooted somehow in a concrete reality. So I read nonfiction because it really happened. I mean, even if it was books like Leon Uris who wrote like Armageddon or Mila 18 or Exodus, Trinity, you know. Or Arthur Hailey, who wrote about hotels and airports and car manufacturers, but read a lot of biographies and autobiographies -- because that was better than anything that you could possibly make up. I lived in a make up, in a nonfiction world --

(CROSSTALK)

AXELROD: (INAUDIBLE)

HANKS: A make believe world. And so I was not profoundly moved by an awful lot of novels, unless they were set in some brand of concrete reality, and that's always been my, my interest in reading. I still read about World War II for pleasure. And the space program. And there's a couple of (LAUGHS) really great books that came out of -- that are in -- and they're about the 1939 World's Fair.

AXELROD: Yeah. You describe it in extraordinary detail. Yeah.

HANKS: Yeah. You can get some good maps of what was there. But here -- because I believe and I have seen over and over again is that vanity, vanity, all is vanity. Nothing new is under the sun. Human behavior has demonstrated itself in a cyclical manner, in the form of history and when you, when you're not involved in the nostalgia of a period, but in the human behavior of a period, it all folds right into what you and I are going through today.

AXELROD: Yes, well, let's talk about that. First of all, what about that World War II experience generation? I remember we are about the same age, I remember when John F. Kennedy came to a little housing development where I grew up in New York to campaign in 1960.

I was a little boy. And thinking back at it, this was a housing development for returning war veterans. And everyone there had just experienced this -- everyone coming together to repel fascism, defend democracy and there was a sense that anything was possible, that you could overcome any obstacle. And I assume that is part of what attracts you to that generation.

HANKS: There was a paradox that I was aware of, from a very early age is that there were two versions of the war. One was the movie war, the TV war, that ongoing mythic -- celebration of what the myth was with the right kind of music and the right kind of triumph and maps and stuff like that.

But then there was the other one that was displayed by every single caregiver, every adult that was in my world, which was they talked about the war in very personal terms, their lives, in fact, were divided up into three very specific acts.

When they talked about life before the war, their lives were simple. Their lives were also dangerous because they could get -- you died of pneumonia before World War II. You could have a tooth abscess that could kill you.

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THE AXE FILES

There was real difference between having 10 cents in the cookie jar and having 45 cents in the cookie jar because that was an entire meal for a family of four, 45 cents. That was before the war. And when they say, "Well, you know, of course, that was before the war," because during the war was this huge cranial shift of their vision of the world. How big it was, how tied it was. And the forces that were out there that effectively altered their daily lives, if it wasn't literally leaving all your -- my dad left his, then his brother left their Willows, California, which just a farm community that could be anywhere in America. And they went to the South Pacific. How does a farm boy get to the South Pacific? So geographically it altered and from the moment the war began, really say 1939 to VE Day in 1945, there was no clue as to how long it was going to last. Their lives were in absolute stasis for -- let's just say six years.

AXELROD: Yes.

HANKS: And to go through that for six years that is an extraordinary acceptance of a brand of fate that you have no control over. You might die, you might never get back. It might be 1952 and guess what? You still are trying to take Saipan or liberate the Netherlands.

AXELROD: You capture a little of this in the story.

HANKS: Yes, there is...

AXELROD: Christmas Eve 1950...

HANKS: Christmas Eve 1953.

AXELROD: ... 53, which really gives you a flavor of what you are talking about.

HANKS: Yes. So seeing these grown-ups talk about it in ways, because they are no longer -- they weren't old folks talking about it. They were young folks talking about it. I always had the sense of those years as being a predominantly waited time for them in which fate was -- they had no control over their lives.

They had to wait for that and they talked about it, well, of course, that was during the war when there were no answers to any questions. And then after the war, of course, it was like we're here and we share that burden with so many other people. There is no reason to talk about it too much because everybody had -- speaks the same common language.

AXELROD: Right. And yet, it did create of sense of community in that -- that was one common element that, sort of, brought everybody from all parts of the country together.

HANKS: My dad had skills that he never would have had because of the war. He became a machinist, so he learned hydraulics and stuff like that. But he also had that grander world vision of places that where he'd gone, and sights that he had seen.

I actually have an example of his VE mail that he is writing a letter to his mom that says absolutely nothing other than "here I am. I am not in the place I was before. I am at a different place now. And some guys down there are talking and going to, taking a rocket to the moon, but I don't think there are any Japs on the moon, so I don't think we will go there anyway. Write

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THE AXE FILES

you next."

And that is the letter. That type of both isolation, at the same time the transportation it goes along, it affected them all. It affected the people that I was closest to.

AXELROD: Your work, not just your acting work, but your documentary work, some of the stories in this book sort of capture -- it is almost in sepia tones that generation, that era, how does it compare to where we are today? You said earlier that there are lessons that you can draw from history.

HANKS: Well, there were times I think when we have a national consciousness of permanence and other times of great transience where we feel as though there are times that are hey, things are going good. And all of our institutions are working according to the contract that we have with them.

And our popular culture is reflecting back to us a contentment and a sense of accomplishment, certainly, in the early 1960s that was an awful lot of what was on the TV. It was in the movies, the nature of what we heard in all the popular culture.

AXELROD: Yes.

HANKS: And right now that - I think the consensus is that those social contracts have all been broken, that we are often lied to, that we are often kept from knowledge. And then there is a reason to be outraged and there is a reason to be afraid.

And there is a reason to look at outsiders as an upsetting of a status quo that really wasn't working for us in the first place. And a lot of that comes from signals that are sent to us by I think organizations or institutions with an agenda.

I remember growing up, there was no such thing as littering. You just threw your garbage out. I remember dumping garbage out of cars or what have you, because it wasn't until Lady Bird Johnson came along with an idea of Keep America Beautiful and stop littering.

When everybody stopped littering, guess what? Our cities were a little bit cleaner and so were the highways and whatnot.

AXELROD: Yes.

HANKS: And I think we are back to littering. I think we are back to this concept of there's, somebody else is responsible for this, not me. Somebody's job is to clean this up. Some aspect of our tax dollars will clean this side of the highway or whatnot.

I think that we are in a period where that brand of transience is -- it is scary, I guess like Springsteen says, there is darkness on the edge of town, you know? At the same time you want to have an understanding of we take care of our own, but there is a type of -- well, I think we are more afraid right now. And I am not sure that we know what we're afraid of.

AXELROD: Well, it is part of it that we are being told by, not just institutions but leaders to be

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THE AXE FILES

afraid?

HANKS: Well...

AXELROD: I mean that is the elephant in the room. We have a president who has got a very sharp edge to him. Does that contribute to that sense?

HANKS: From a guy who, lay historian who goes that here is -- Daniel Moynihan had this great saying, which was you are entitled to your own opinion, but you are not entitled to your own facts.

And that is not true anymore. Everybody has their own facts. And they cling to them. Sometimes they're insane conspiracy theories, but other times there are interpretations of people's motives and other times it is like $2 \times 2 = 4$.

There is not an accountant in the world that doesn't understand 2×2 does in fact equal 4. That's a fact. But as soon as you apply that to a measure of ozone in the air or a loss of ice in the polar ice, well suddenly those facts, 2×2 doesn't equal 4 anymore. It means there is something else. You can question literally the math.

AXELROD: One of the institutions that people relied on when we were kids and for some time was the news media to deliver those facts. The fourth estate.

HANKS: Exactly. And what are the four? Help me out there. There is government.

AXELROD: Yes.

HANKS: There is the military. There is religion and then there is the press.

AXELROD: Yes. I grew up as a reporter and so I didn't care about the other three.

HANKS: Oh, right. Okay.

AXELROD: I was in the fourth estate.

HANKS: Those are estates that give order to our lives that dictate our behaviors and keep us secure and establish the contract we have, both with our neighbors, with our towns and with our nation and the rest of the world.

AXELROD: Yes. You just completed a film that is going to be released later this month called The Post, about the Washington Post. And a particular episode in its storied history that went to the publication of the Pentagon Papers, secret papers that revealed what was going on inside the government and in many cases, things that were hidden from the American people about judgments that were made.

It was very, very controversial. Tell me about the big deal, yes. We will keep it there.

HANKS: Yes.

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO INSTITUTE OF POLITICS & CNN PRESENT

THE AXE FILES

AXELROD: Tell me about that film.

HANKS: Well, it was...

AXELROD: Steven Spielberg --

HANKS: Yes, Steven Spielberg directed it and it's really the story of how Kay Graham came to be Kay Graham. And it just happened to all--

AXELROD: Publisher of the Washington Post--

HANKS: Publisher of the Washington Post as well as Newsweek and television stations. And it all just happened to occur in the same week. And in order to be not just the figurehead, but also the owner and the publisher and the person who made the decisions, Katharine Graham had to decide whether or not to print stories about the Pentagon Papers.

AXELROD: Perhaps on the threat of imprisonment.

HANKS: Right. The New York Times who had run -- who had already run the huge stories on it was shut down in fact. Is it enjoined? What is the word?

AXELROD: Enjoined, yes.

HANKS: They were enjoined from publishing any more by the government, by the Justice Department. They were shut down by agents of the president of the United States. Under the auspices it's treasonous to publish this report that essentially just tells what happened since 1947.

And I think that the actual report, it was already five years old that it existed and there wasn't secret plans and there wasn't battle plans. No one's lives were going to be lost by the publishing of the papers.

AXELROD: Right.

HANKS: It was just like how did we get involved in Vietnam. It was asked to be prepared by the Secretary of Defense, Robert McNamara.

AXELROD: Yes.

HANKS: Because he says, we are in this mess. How did we get here? And it was just the story of how we ended up in Vietnam. The Washington Post found their own copies of enough of the pages in order to print their own stories on the Pentagon Papers, but the threat was if we do, are we committing treason?

If we do, is the Justice Department going to lock us up because we are committing a crime based on what the government is saying. So the assault on the first amendment was pretty basic. The assault was -- I think it you can almost take away the rest of the Constitution, but as

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THE AXE FILES

long as you have that first amendment everything else could probably be defined by it -- freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, freedom of the press.

AXELROD: Yes. Yes. The reason it's the first amendment.

HANKS: Yes. They came up with that number one. The other stuff, they go, oh, we should think about that too.

AXELROD: Yes.

HANKS: But those three things alone and you had a president of the United States who is trying to shut down, literally, trying to keep from publishing...

AXELROD: Richard Nixon...

HANKS: Richard Nixon was. And that is what tyrants do. That is what crappy communist dictators do. In the smaller countries on the other side. That is what banana republic dictators do.

They shut down the newspapers. They keep them from printing, whatever stories it is. I think it is interesting, David, because the question as we go on and talk about this movie. It is all about fake news.

AXELROD: Right.

HANKS: There has always been fake news. When they wrote the Constitution of the United States, there were daily newspapers that printed one side of the story without any regard to what the truth is. They have agendas and they have always gone out and tried to tell only their side of what the story is, so it's sometimes an outright lie.

Frank Sinatra fought against fake news for crying out loud, between gossip and the real --

AXELROD: The tools of delivery though are more sophisticated now, more pervasive and sometimes hard to track.

HANKS: Well, it comes back down to what facts are you going to choose. If you read about, like I just heard this thing on National Public Radio, the history of the Pizzagate story, the Comet Pizzagate story, it's madness.

AXELROD: A phony story trying to link Hillary or linking Hillary Clinton to a fictitious plot around sex trafficking of--

HANKS: Sex trafficking of young kids--

AXELROD: In Washington. And that some guy came up there believing that story, 2.5 million people read it. Some guy came up there with a gun.

HANKS: And you go back to the news organizations that published or broadcast or talked

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO INSTITUTE OF POLITICS & CNN PRESENT

THE AXE FILES

about that story as though it was a fact, nearly resulted in a guy with a gun shooting up a bunch of people in a pizzeria in suburban Washington, D.C.

That is an example of -- there was no fact there. So the idea that they are -- and you can go -- look, who was the guy that ran the Chicago Tribune during World -- Colonel McCormick?

AXELROD: Colonel McCormick.

HANKS: All right. He printed his own versions of the facts. Yes.

AXELROD: And that was a tradition in American journalist earlier, as I said it is just a pervasiveness of it now given the tools that are available with social media.

HANKS: Yes.

AXELROD: The polarization on cable television and so on, but this movie, what is your hope? What is Steven Spielberg's hope in...

HANKS: I can't speak for Steven. He is the boss.

AXELROD: Yes. Well, I'll take yours.

HANKS: Okay. The point that it takes is this, is that we are not the United States of America without the first amendment. Freedom of speech means you get to say whatever you want to say outside of screaming "fire" in a crowded theater because people can die. That's not freedom of speech. That's a crime.

AXELROD: Right.

HANKS: Freedom of assembly means you get to get together and hang out all you want to with whoever you want to. Burning down a synagogue is going to be allowed by that, but short of committing crimes and assaults, you get to assemble with any group you want to (inaudible).

Freedom of the press requires the same sort of absolute that you -- we live in a country where we are able to publish, and anybody gets to say whatever they want to base on, I think, an individual contract that your organ has with society as a whole.

If your contract is we are going to not only get the truth, but we are going to double and triple check it and we are going to go a far distance, so that by the time you read what our findings are, you can have a huge amount of confidence that due diligence has been done, then you can decide whether or not it's important.

AXELROD: So it is a current issue as you know.

HANKS: Oh, well, it is right--

AXELROD: Because the president has targeted news organizations that have printed things that he finds inconvenient --

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THE AXE FILES

HANKS: I believe he calls CNN fake news.

AXELROD: He did indeed, and the Washington Post.

HANKS: And the Washington Post.

AXELROD: And other news organizations as well. How much does that concern you?

HANKS: Well, as an American, it concerns me -- because it's monkeying around with our Constitution. It is relatively obvious I think what is trying to go forward, when you tear down these institutions to a level of, so you can't believe anything that is in any of them. That raises the stock of those agenda-filled other institutions and whatnot, so that if you can't believe them, well, that means you get to believe some of the other stuff that is in these.

And so what is happening is that dilution of the great -- they're throwing dirt and oil into a bucket of water so it all becomes undrinkable after a while. And when conspiracy theorists ends up having the same amount of purchase as 27 reporters who are trying to get to the bottom of some records that exist somewhere, trying to determine what was said about Vietnam in 1956 and 1947 and 1963, well, then you're monkeying around with I think what the United States of America has been based upon, which is the great freedom to say what you want, assemble with who you want to and read and be informed by those people that you want to turn to.

Now, because we're not -- I think what the current administration is doing, I don't know that they are saying we have to shut them down so they don't publish anymore. That would...

AXELROD: Right. Although the president did muse about pulling the license of NBC.

HANKS: Which he does not have the power.

AXELROD: There is some question about this anti-trust.

HANKS: There is that. There is that.

AXELROD: Yes.

HANKS: But he is doing -- what is happening is something that is more subtle and more insidious and I think has more fingerprints from other, other governments in the past who have said, look, we can't shut them down because that will cause outrage, but we can denigrate them. We can call them names. We can tell people that those are not the facts. That is what he is saying.

AXELROD: You got into -- were criticized by some back at the beginning of the administration I think I shared your view when you said, "I am not rooting for the president to fail."

HANKS: Yes.

AXELROD: And I thought back too at the beginning of the Obama administration when I was in

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THE AXE FILES

the administration, Rush Limbaugh said I'm rooting for the president to fail. And I thought particularly at a time of national emergency, that was a terrible thing to say.

And so I felt you owe the next president that same presumption. We are now 10 months in. Where do you think -- how would you evaluate him?

HANKS: Well, when we were at -- back in the golden months of last October, before the election, people stick microphones in your face, do you think Donald Trump is going to get elected?

And I said, I guess I was one them that said, no way, you don't know -- you don't elect a guy like that, president of the United States. And I thought that all the way up and I said something glib or flip like if that is going to happen, well you know what? Then aliens are going to land on my front lawn and dinosaurs are going to wear capes. It was a silly answer for something that was impossible. But...

AXELROD: You checked your lawn lately?

HANKS: Well, if I had said -- if I had said instead, if that happens we are going to -- neo-Nazis are going to hold torchlight parades in Charlottesville and Pocahontas jokes will be said in front of the Navajo Code talkers. That would have been just as hellacious in imagination I think as what we have.

AXELROD: What role do you think the entertainment industry played in putting Donald Trump in a position to become president of the United States?

HANKS: Well, I think there is an us versus them kind of thing. I think a lot of times there's preaching to the choir that they can come out of the Hollywood machinery. I think a lot of times stories are incredibly easy in order to show how good guys always win. But I think it is also part of the transit and the -- a bit of the divide.

AXELROD: But let me just say it is ironic to me because if not for The Apprentice in that vehicle that he had he likely wouldn't be president of the United States today, and yet he also benefits from the disapprobation of the media, of the entertainment industry, I should say, Hollywood. I watched the Emmys and it was a real beat down on Donald Trump.

HANKS: Yes. Oh, yes. Yes.

AXELROD: And my guess -- and my thought was, boy, this has probably helped some with his support.

HANKS: Oh, yes, I think so because at the end of the day it is dog-piling, it's a degree of cheap shots. I will say -- I think we have admit this, though. Something profound came out of that election and that is the rules were smashed. The rules no longer applied.

A candidate could say outrageous things and not be penalized by -- when it came down to the voting booth. And you can look at this, so some aspect of it there was national referendum that had had enough of this ongoing political continuum that was always say the right things.

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO INSTITUTE OF POLITICS & CNN PRESENT

THE AXE FILES

AXELROD: Yes.

HANKS: Always feed your base. Always say just glittering generalities about anybody because you don't want to offend. And that is translated I think as you don't want to tell the truth about what your opinions are. Here is a guy that you can't stop telling --

AXELROD: No one ever says I wish he'd speak his mind.

HANKS: Yes, yes. And what could come out of that. Well, what good could come out of that is on whatever other side of the political divide, you will start hearing people speak their minds. And unfortunately, it seems as though the only people who have done that so far are folks who no longer are running for office, you know?

AXELROD: Sure. Yes.

HANKS: Who aren't part of the -- who aren't part of the -- that political combine that is a business in and of itself, show business for ugly people.

AXELROD: You have talked about yourself as a lay historian here. You gave an answer in an interview recently about where you think we are going, and because there is a sense of unsettlement, of unease about where we are in the sense of, well, we've crossed some Rubicon and we can't get back.

And you quoted a book that Jay Winik wrote about...

HANKS: Oh yes.

AXELROD: ... called April 1865.

HANKS: April 1865. Yes.

AXELROD: And tell me about that. What was the point you were making? Because it seems to be saying you were -- we should play the long game and that things will change again.

HANKS: Yes, yes. What he put forward is in regard to the question of slavery, for 15 years, 20 years for most of the -- up until 1860, the issue had become so pervasively divided that were not allowed to speak to, if you were pro-slavery, you could not speak to the abolitionists. And if you're abolitionist, you couldn't have anything to do, compromise was evil, compromise any sort of like voting process, any sort of discussion not that there was an awful lot of compromise you could have by keeping an entire race of people in bondage in order to make them work in the field.

AXELROD: Right. Right.

HANKS: But there had been an uncompromising quality in which all of the political society had become binary. If you were a zero, there was no way you were a one. And if you were a one, there was no way you were zero.

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THE AXE FILES

AXELROD: Sounds a little familiar.

HANKS: And, yes, and what came out of it six years of strife and I mean more people were killed and more property was destroyed in the Civil War than all the other American involvements. That ends up being history.

In all of the history that I've read, in all of the various, I don't know, all the various things that I have tried to turn into nonfiction entertainment, you do come back to this other thing which is the power of our immediate foundation. Some of this began because when I was doing Philadelphia...

AXELROD: Yes.

HANKS: ... in Philadelphia and so I'm walking around trying to get skinny because we're playing somebody who's suffering from the very pandemic of our age, we visited the family, we visited Independence Hall, which is a great place. There's things you go see, you go to the Liberty Bell, there is it is, and you got the, the Supreme Court was in this room and the House of Representatives in this room and the Senate was up in this room.

And the park ranger, the guy in literally the green uniform, the Smoky Bear hat because we're in the Senate chambers, we're the only ones there, it was a cold day, it was a weekday, and that he said and on that spot there, the physical spot, John Adams was sworn in as the second president of the United States. And for the first time in recorded human history, rule of a nation changed hands to a non-relative without bloodshed or death. And my head exploded because I hadn't put it together that way. The great thing about our democracy is not us putting people into power. It's taking people out of power.

AXELROD: Yes.

HANKS: It's removing them. Egypt was a country that did not have a voice in who ran it any more than they could stop the sun from rising. They put in one group and what they couldn't figure out is how to take the second step, was to move the people that you want to take out of office because they had to end up in a revolution with that.

AXELROD: Right.

HANKS: But in America, we've done it again and again and again and again.

AXELROD: Which I think we take for granted.

HANKS: We do because even right now it's like, oh, there's an impeachment thing that's going around there.

AXELROD: Now, what do you think about that?

HANKS: I'd say we have something better in store than that. We have an election coming up in less than a year now.

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO INSTITUTE OF POLITICS & CNN PRESENT

THE AXE FILES

AXELROD: Yes.

HANKS: 2018 is going to send a message that is going to reverberate much more than any Senate hearings or congressional stuff that's going to go by. That election in 2018 is going to prove one of two things, we will continue along and we will have the government we deserve, or a lot of people are going to show up and be motivated to vote in order to send out the way, to say we are not satisfied with the way things are going right now.

You go to any other nation in the world and you find out that in the United States, how much of our electorate turns out to vote in any given year?

AXELROD: Yes.

HANKS: Forty percent.

AXELROD: Yes. Yes. I mean more on a presidential race, but...

HANKS: More on a presidential race. So if there is a turnout that says we're not satisfied with this, hey, baby, that's even better than going through the machinations.

AXELROD: Only other thing and I've said this is I think impeachment is a tool that should be used very carefully because if it becomes commonplace to say I dislike who's in office so we're just going to impeach them, and I understand there are provocations, but there is a system in place, there are people who are investigating things that will even lead to something where they want. But if it becomes a casual tool, I think it's bad for the country in the long run and it's one more institution that will be abused. So now we can find there are plenty of people who will debate both of us on this point.

HANKS: If crimes have been committed, yes, I get it.

AXELROD: Right.

HANKS: But we don't have to -- you think it's a marathon. There's a longer phase that we can have and everything goes in spurts, stops and starts. Sometimes you take one step forward, two steps back, but other times you take one step back and two steps forward and that means you just keep moving forward a little bit.

AXELROD: I have to ask you about investigative reporting, because it's also shining a bright light in the corners of other corridors of power, and Hollywood has come under that scrutiny. You've seen some real giants of your industry, Harvey Weinstein, Kevin Spacey and others, who have been I guess "exposed" is the wrong word but who have been identified as sexual harassers, sexual abuses or at least there are allegations.

HANKS: Yes. Allegations--

AXELROD: Allegations, predators.

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THE AXE FILES

HANKS: Yes.

AXELROD: Predators. How pervasive is that in the industry itself and how complicit is everyone who has been around it all these years and not said anything?

HANKS: Well, that's a good question. I mean anybody who had like very specific knowledge of what was going on, they'll have to answer questions about how complicit were they.

AXELROD: And so a lot of stars, people you've acted with...

HANKS: Right--

AXELROD: Yes, but they came forward after these very brave women who were not prominent and who were not powerful told their stories to the New York Times, told them to Ronan Farrow in the New Yorker.

HANKS: Yes. Yes. I think there's a number of reasons people go into this line of work that I'm in, essentially trying to come up with stories that people will pay to see, one is because it's just ridiculous amounts of fun, two is if you can make it stick you can be a pretty good living and you get to travel the world and you see interesting things.

Some people do it for power. They just want to have a degree of power, because that's the thing that gives them credence, something on one hand it's a parking space with your name on it and you take it to another extreme. It's the ability to beat up on underlings and say things like, "So you want a job? You want to keep your job? Then you're going to have to fulfill these other demands I have that are of a sexual actual nature." That is pure, to the degree of assault.

There were people like that without a doubt in Hollywood. It's not common core, but without a doubt it's widespread, because human nature comes down to a lot of times those people in power have it for that ability, that access in order to be a sexual predator.

AXELROD: We've seen it in politics, in business.

HANKS: It's everywhere. But part of it also is because, look, in a lot of ways we all left town and joined the circus, and the circus is glamorous in a lot of ways. And there is camaraderie and there is sex and there's attraction and there's boyfriends and girlfriends and there's flirting and that's always been part of, there's on-set affairs. There's no law against that.

AXELROD: Right. But this goes far beyond...

HANKS: This goes much farther beyond that because it ends up being a swaying of influence and it becomes part of the marketplace. It becomes when it is inherent into the workforce that you join that you have to succumb to a degree of sexual harassment in order to keep your job, when that happens the only thing you can say is, number one, I hope the victims come out and tell all sorts of stories, everything, tell the truth about what goes on and that the repercussions land exactly as they should.

AXELROD: First of all, were you surprised by some of these revelations?

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THE AXE FILES

HANKS: I'm surprised by the overtness of it. Yes. Sure. Yes. Absolutely. Am I surprised at some of the personalities involved? Not Harvey. He had a way of doing business and zero sum game, negotiation stuff that would not make you surprised to have him be one of those kind of guys that does that in the workplace. Others are just like, there's a time and place for decorum and ethics and you blew it. There's that as well.

AXELROD: Do you think that there'll be scripts written about this, about these women who lived in terror or how it would protect itself from that?

HANKS: Oh, no. I think there's going to be quite a bit that's going to come out about it. Here's what's going to be an interesting test. Is that going to be salacious, titillating, shocking, outrageous in order to draw viewers or is it going to be human and realistic and authentic in its details in order to fill it in?

In some ways, you can already see. I'm sure there's already stories in development that are going to be based on the Harvey Weinstein or whatever. And is that going to be as, what's the word I'm looking for, is that going to be as pure an examination of the theme as somebody else coming along saying, let's fictionalize it and turn it into something so that we're not necessarily dealing with the specifics of any one person but can get down to the specifics of what it really did to the human beings involved.

AXELROD: Let's talk about Philadelphia which was a brave film in 1993. Do you think they have the power to change things? Do you think Philadelphia hastened an understanding of AIDS?

HANKS: I think it is both in what it accomplished and what it failed to accomplish. The throwing deep in the end-zone on Philadelphia was that it was going to compete in the open marketplace. You can make a small movie for \$400,000 and it could play it in every film festival in the world and only 62,000 people will see it. It will be a profoundly good movie to them. But when you're going out and you're going to compete in your local marketplace for a broad audience to come in and deal with something that is kind of ripped right out of today's headlines, you have to do it in a manner that is going to be somehow so approachable, authentic and glamorous in order to attract an audience who simply wants to be entertained. If they become enlightened at the same time, good for you.

But then throughout all of American history and which I have said "Gentleman's Agreement" with Gregory Peck in 1952 was about anti-Semitism and no one had ever touched before. "The Best Years of Our Lives" was about the emptiness that an entire generation faced when they came back from the war and how in the world did they get on with that. You can go, "The Grapes of Wrath." I mean even though the ending was absolutely nothing like John Steinbeck wrote, it ended up being indurated in the national consciousness and changing that consciousness because you could not argue with the theme that it was examining.

And Hollywood will do that all the time. It won't always land on it, it won't always make it happen. It might cop out periodically, but there's always going to be something coming down the pike that is meant to do it. The difference now is it might be on a streaming service as opposed to playing in your local cinema because the superheroes are filling up all the cinemas.

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THE AXE FILES

AXELROD: Do you feel that when you look at roles, do you look for scripts? Are you excited by scripts that have that power, that might, or do you just look at them--?

HANKS: No. There's an awful lot of like preaching to the choir. There's an awful lot of stories that people want to tell and there's no surprise in it. And then they're kind of polemics, if I'm using the word polemics right.

AXELROD: Yes. Right.

HANKS: They're just kind of like treatises on something and there's nothing new, there's nothing unique. And I find them kind of a lot of times they're void of the gray areas of human behavior. Oftentimes there's a specific bad guy and there's a specific good guy. And a lot of times there are no good guys or bad guys, there's just people who are poorly motivated or wrong.

So the things I look for is I was very lucky because when I went to Cleveland for the first year, I held a torch or maybe it was a spear during the entire scene of Hamlet's Advice to the Players. So every night I heard speak the speech I pray you, as I pronounce trippingly off the tongue. And inside that he says, your job is to hold the mirror up to nature, means you have to reflect back true human behavior, how we think, how we act. And the great paradoxes that are in all of our decisions. That is what I seek out in whatever it is I decide to go on even if you're searching for the Da Vinci Code or trying to determine who's an angel.

AXELROD: Yes, kind of I think in your industry as well as in politics where I worked for all those years, authenticity means so much. The ability to be true, as you suggest, is almost more important than anything else.

HANKS: Right. And how true is your average photo op in politics in which bales of hay have been realistically arranged in front of the barn on a riser with TV lights on it and a collection of citizens are put in the back and they're all in different dress and they all have, and someone comes on and talk about their intense desire to help the American family.

AXELROD: So I'm going to ask you. Is that a leading question?

HANKS: No, no. I'm just setting the stage--

AXELROD: No, you're right. No, no, no. But that doesn't mean that the people who ultimately succeed are the people who break through that and can make a real connection.

HANKS: Right. It ends up being what you're saying and what is actually the authentic message that you're trying, what is the authentic change you're trying to bring, what is the enlightenment that, for what I do. What are we actually trying to tell any audience that comes in and watches a movie? You want them to feel as though they got their money's worth. That's just business. That's the corporate side of it. But the artistic side of it is you want them to feel as though they were a part of something much larger than themselves and have a slightly new perspective on life as we know it, whether they're seeing movie that takes place in the 1700s or they're seeing a movie that took place in 1971.

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THE AXE FILES

AXELROD: I will say that polling has gotten a bad rap, so I tell you this advisedly. But every poll I look at says Tom Hanks is the most trusted, Tom Hanks is the most beloved and popular actor so...

HANKS: Is that right, guys? Give me a big huzzah.

AXELROD: So you must be...

HANKS: They're not allowed to say.

AXELROD: So you've made that connection for a very long time and that's an enormous accomplishment.

HANKS: I don't discount that. Actually, that says something. This is the way I take it, is that my countenance, if I should be so bold, matches my choices.

AXELROD: Yes.

HANKS: I think that when you get to this point where you realize you're a bit of a commodity, and I realize I am from the business perspective and the people who want me to do business with them, I understand I'm bringing into it the sum of everything I've ever done, everything I've ever said, any reaction any audience has ever had.

AXELROD: Probably don't screw it up now.

HANKS: One, don't screw it up, but at the same time you must stretch it somehow because otherwise all you are is a bottle of Coca-Cola.

AXELROD: Right.

HANKS: You need to provide some other brand of nourishment and healthiness. And so it goes kind of very flattering polls that people say, what better thing could you hear about yourself other than, hey, I trust you.

AXELROD: Yes.

HANKS: That's about the highest praise you can get from anybody and I got to tell you there's times I've lied through my teeth, sometimes in promoting movies even I knew weren't any good. But you could still into that, an understanding of sometimes you take a shot, sometimes you don't. But countenance matching up with the quality of the choices you make, that's outside of longevity, that's the only stand that you can hold yourself to.

AXELROD: Tom Hanks, pleasure to be with you.

HANKS: I'm exhausted, David. Have I pontificated enough?

AXELROD: We're going to give you a rest. No, it's really so good to be with you, and I --.

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO INSTITUTE OF POLITICS & CNN PRESENT

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HANKS: Oh, thank you. I enjoyed talking to you. I've got to get my memorabilia back. OK. Did we hit it?