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The Axe Files - Ep. 200: Ed Gillespie

Released December 11, 2017

David Axelrod: [00:00:00] Ed Gillespie welcome. Thank you. Great to be with lot. Lot to talk about and obviously you've had an interesting year and we want to talk about that. But before we get there I want to talk about the journey to that year and start with the fact that we have something in common that we both are the sons of immigrants. Tell me about your. Tell me about your folks.

Ed Gillespie: [00:00:24] My father came to this country as a boy from Ireland he was 8 years old and his grandfather had found work in America and my grandfather was a janitor. He worked at a big bank building in Philadelphia. And he'd go in after the bank closed six o'clock at night. It started an eight hour shift and he'd start on the ground floor emptying the waste baskets and mopping the floors and over the course of an eight hour shift he'd work his way to the top story and the last thing he would do would be to polish the big wooden conference table in the boardroom and get home around to 30 to 45 Mai in the morning. My parents didn't go to college. Neither one of the smartest and hardest working people I've ever known. They worked on their feet all day in a grocery store. The J and C market and J and C were Jack and Connie. And that was my mom and dad it was a mom and pop grocery store and in my family. When you turn 12 you got a birthday cake and a present in the four hour shift at the J.C. market we all worked in that grocery store.

David Axelrod: [00:01:17] Your dad was a veteran as well.

Ed Gillespie: [00:01:18] He was decorated World War II an infantry leader. Both my parents are laid to rest in a veterans cemetery and my father two Purple Hearts a Bronze Star and a Silver Star in World War II. And the infantry. And you know I always say Jack Gillespie was born in Donegal Ireland but he died a great American and he instilled that in us.

[00:01:40] And I believe to this day that you know people who come here legally and become Americans are patriotic Americans first generation Americans very patriotic. And you know we've seen the blessings of liberty in this country and my family.

David Axelrod: [00:01:57] You your folks were were Democrats. Yeah your mom ran for the school board is that right.

Ed Gillespie: [00:02:05] The first race I ever worked on was when I was 9 years old and my mother was the first woman ever elected to the school board in our town. And so she was she you know shattered a glass ceiling was a trailblazer and then became president of the school and became president of the school board and she served I think about 12 years on the school board. And did she talk about why she wanted. I mean do you remember her talk about why she wanted to do. Well you know we were one of six children and she had six children in the in the public schools and I think she was concerned about the schools. You know we weren't a political family. My father was you know as you know a grocer and standing behind that grocery store counter people come in and out of the store all day long and they would ask him what he thought about different races in Afghanistan better than being a pollster and he had to he had a pretty good political attack. He had a tavern is where I always say you know he lived every Irishman's dream eventually he sold the store and you bought a bar and you get some opinions

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO INSTITUTE OF POLITICS & CNN PRESENT

THE AXE FILES

there is there was a shot and a beer kind of place. There is no tap you know it was all just long. So you could get a mixed drink of all the ingredients were in the name of the drink. In 1977 we could make a buck and. We could make that.

[00:03:18] But it was a you know a very you know working class family and we cared about and were interested in politics. They were Democrats and I was you know was born a Democrat. If you're Irish Catholic born in New Jersey in 1961 the year John F. Kennedy is and they all but stamped on your birth certificate. Over time my father became an independent.

David Axelrod: [00:03:41] Did you have a picture of JFK up in the saloon?

Ed Gillespie: [00:03:44] JFK in a house, at our home a picture of JFK and Pope John.

David Axelrod: [00:03:53] The 23rd.

Ed Gillespie: [00:03:54] And so that was the culture that I grew up in. My father became an independent registered independent and couldn't bring himself to be a Republican but he grew disenchanted with the Democratic Party under Jimmy Carter. And he found Reagan very appealing like a lot of ethnic Democrats in the Midwest and the Northeast you know in the in 1980 and 84.

David Axelrod: [00:04:21] You went off to. You went to Washington to go to college a Catholic university.

Ed Gillespie: [00:04:26] I did. And it wasn't my intention. I was originally wanted to go to school in New England but I got rejected and ended up in Washington D.C. at Catholic University which is where I was meant to be and worked my way through school. I took out student loans and I and I parked cars at the Senate Senate parking lot. And that's how I ended up getting into politics. I actually wanted to go into journalism and was going to study and I was studying communications and journalism and I was the sports editor of the school paper.

David Axelrod: [00:04:59] Yeah, I saw that. So when you so did that parking of cars at the Senate expose you to people who who looked after you gave you opportunities. How did that all happen?

Ed Gillespie: [00:05:12] It did, one of the one of the guys I was parking cars with and the neat thing about parking cars there it's all students from all the different colleges from around the District of Columbia. And so you got to meet you know kids from Georgetown and American and Howard and Catholic and Trinity and that was very interesting. And when I had an internship in one of the offices on the House side and said there was another internship available to office you should intern there so I applied for the internship. And that led to a job. And that led to another job in another job.

David Axelrod: [00:05:48] And you went to work for a congressman from Florida who was a Democrat.

Ed Gillespie: [00:05:53] Andy Ireland yes. I thought was.

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THE AXE FILES

[00:05:58] But he became a Republican in the realignment you know in 1984 he ran as a Republican and changed parties and that's when I became a Republican.

David Axelrod: [00:06:07] And then you. I mean you became you. You took that communications interest of yours and you applied it to politics.

[00:06:15] You went to work for Dick Armev who became quite an influential figure in the shift in the Republican Party.

Ed Gillespie: [00:06:21] He was a freshman member of Congress who was elected in 1984 as a big landslide year obviously for President Reagan and a lot of coattails and six Republican freshmen members of Congress were elected in Texas that year and they called him the Texas six pack. And I wanted to be a press secretary. And because of my interest in journalism and could write pretty well. But there wasn't an opening in the office and Andy Ireland's office and so someone that I knew told me about this this opening and Dick Army's Office and I applied there and got the job and went to work for him in his first month in office. He was an economics professor at University of North Texas conservative free market conservative and you know really driven by ideas and we clicked and he had a very good office. And you know he kind of became a force of nature in the house even though the House Republican Conference you know ultimately became head of the House Republican Conference but really kind of what made his name was he passed the base closure Bill. The base closing and realignment act and that's still in effect today.

[00:07:31] That is the process by which we determine what bases military bases to keep open or closed or consolidate.

David Axelrod: [00:07:36] Which is as sensitive a process as there can be because communities rely on those bases for economic reasons and so they fight hard to keep them whether it makes sense or not.

Ed Gillespie: [00:07:50] Well and that's why he was trying to remove that decision making process from the political thicket and have it be a less political process and that's what the base closing and realignment commission does. It's still very political and has a huge impact obviously and people try to affect it but it's not as affected as if it were just a decision made by members of Congress earmarking and that kind of thing. I remember during the course of that debate Bob Dole who obviously has a great sense of humor told a story about a base closure when he was a freshman House member and he got a call from the senator from Kansas who said they're closing a base and don't call the senator because he got notice that they were closing the base in his district and he said Do you want to announce this with me. And the senator said to him No I only announce space opening. It's a very you know it has an impact obviously. And so to move it out of the out of the political spectrum and into a more rational decision making process has had a long term beneficial effect. NetNet to the to the country. But you know it's caused pain in certain communities obviously.

David Axelrod: [00:08:53] You you you met your wife during this period she was working on the Hill.

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO INSTITUTE OF POLITICS & CNN PRESENT

THE AXE FILES

Ed Gillespie: [00:09:00] She was and working for a Texas member and we had a softball team for the Texas offices and we met playing softball in a Congressional Softball League and I went out to practice and she was pitching and someone handed me a bat and said Why don't you take some some licks and so I went up to home plate and I looked out on the mound and there she was and that was it truly felt like lightning.

David Axelrod: [00:09:25] How did you do at the plate there.

Ed Gillespie: [00:09:26] I took her deep. We've been married 30 years now.

David Axelrod: [00:09:31] She she. I know she worked for Joe Barton. And what was your you must have known him well were you.

[00:09:40] You must have been shocked by his demise.

Ed Gillespie: [00:09:45] Yeah I was you know surprised by it analytical demise. Yeah still with us. You know I have. And you know he came in. He was part of that Texas six pack and Kathy was his first you know employee, she was at Texas A&M and she basically ran his campaign out of her her college apartment and was his first paid employee.

[00:10:09] It was it was for a special election to replace Phil Gramm when he had run Senator Tower Senate seat. And so it was an interesting race. And you know I always feel that one of the biggest risks in Washington and in particular in the house is people staying too long. And I like Joe and I think he's served the people of the 6th district well. But I think to my mind this is you know one of the things that happens when someone stays too long and a friend of mine mentioned Robert Hurt who is a member of Congress from Virginia. And he called me after serving for I think three terms maybe four you know couple of years ago and said I'm not going to run for re-election. And I said good for you. I said you know I think that's great. You served you served honorably. You're going home. That's what the Founders had in mind. And you know you served the people of the fifth district very well here. Your boys are still young enough for you. You know the time you spend with them is important and I'm happy for you. And you know doing a public affairs program at Liberty University. And he loves it. And I think that if more of the members of the House in particular but that's true of the Senate as well to come and then leave after a certain period on their own terms are just too many of these these folks get carried out on their shields because they stay too long.

David Axelrod: [00:11:35] Barton was caught up in this really cultural sea change that's starting. I mean it was disclosed that he had sent some photos that were inappropriate. And what do you make of all of this and how where it is where is it going to lead. Because you know these charges go right up to the president of the United States.

Ed Gillespie: [00:12:00] Well I think in fairness to Joe you know and these are you know distinctions that it's kind of unbelievable to me that these are the distinctions we're making in this conversation but you know in his case these were adult women largely his age that he was engaged in extramarital affairs with. But they were consensual. And you know that's a distinction I think between someone who is engaged in a relationship with someone in a subordinate position or are harassing you know sexually harassing employees or staff or

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO INSTITUTE OF POLITICS & CNN PRESENT

THE AXE FILES

harassing even those who are not employees or staff and it's not consensual and you know these are the conversations.

[00:12:46] It is clear to me seems right now we're going to be having for for a while.

David Axelrod: [00:12:52] And maybe some of it we should I mean because it isn't just limited to politics but also business Hollywood. You seen it. We've seen examples in all these places. Men in positions of power abuse it in ways that are untoward. Yes. So it's just it's. Someone told me I won't repeat the number but someone suggested to me the numbers of members of Congress who may fall into this category and are at risk is quite significant.

Ed Gillespie: [00:13:29] And you know there's a lot that that is going on right now it is a significant cultural moment. I have two young daughters.

David Axelrod: [00:13:40] I know one of them yes, a great young woman.

Ed Gillespie: [00:13:42] Very bright and you know entering the workforce and I have to admit that I've been stunned by the number of people who engage in that. I've been very fortunate I think and I guess apparently I've been fortunate in the circumstances in which I've worked in that. And I've and I've pressed myself. I suspect everyone has you know have we have I seen this in my own workforce's and in offices where I've worked. And I really can't think of instances of this kind of harassment.

[00:14:25] And I've prided myself and in my own businesses and working with women in promoting them and and treating them with respect.

[00:14:35] And I've been amazed at how rampant this is.

[00:14:40] And I do think that it's a moment that is going to result in change as much for the better for my daughters and for future generations of women.

David Axelrod: [00:14:51] I can't we can't leave this without me asking you a couple of obvious questions. One is about the president himself and there are all these numbers of women who have stepped forward and accused him of abuse of her of harassment at a minimum. Nikki Haley the ambassador to the United Nations said this past weekend these women should be taken seriously they should be heard. What's your feeling about that and what message does it send and we can go back. Look we can have an honest discussion about... There are Democratic presidents who have been guilty of things that under today's under today's in today's world would not have been tolerated. Yeah but what's your view of it.

Ed Gillespie: [00:15:49] I believe these women relative to the president will be heard. And the question is in what venue and to what end. I don't know the answers to that but I suspect we're going to hear more from them as we're going to hear more from women who have been affected in the workplace and more in Hollywood and more on Capitol Hill and in other venues.

[00:16:10] Now you've seen the situation with Senator Franken. You see with who resigned who resigned Representative Franks there are others Joe Barton said he's not going to seek re-election. There are others who have whose names have been put forward. Representative

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO INSTITUTE OF POLITICS & CNN PRESENT

THE AXE FILES

Conyers obviously and each of them are in different situations to a certain extent and how you know how they how you get to a certain extent justice or you know fairness in that in that process. I think it's going to be different in these different venues.

[00:16:51] You know to your point about well what if the president you know being heard. I think they're going to be heard. Where does that.

David Axelrod: [00:16:58] If those charges are proven. You know and presumably the same kinds of things apply here as elsewhere they may have talked to people contemporaneously about it and so on. What what what then what happened.

Ed Gillespie: [00:17:15] That's my I don't know. You know .

David Axelrod: [00:17:18] I mean should the president also resign as the others have resigned.

[00:17:22] Are those if those things are true. Should the president. Should the president resign?

Ed Gillespie: [00:17:26] Again. You know he has said that they're not true. And you know...

David Axelrod: [00:17:31] It's kind of a weird thing though if you deny it you can go on. If you accept if you acknowledge it, you resign it's kind of a perverse incentive, you know.

Ed Gillespie: [00:17:41] Again that's not the right word here. But this is I think because we're in uncharted waters here to a certain extent. And I think these things are going to play themselves out in a way that it's hard to it's hard to be predictive right now.

David Axelrod: [00:18:00] You are a former chair of the RNC.

Ed Gillespie: [00:18:03] Yes.

David Axelrod: [00:18:04] The RNC is now supporting as we sit here today the race will be tomorrow. Roy Moore in Alabama. Do you think the RNC should be supporting more. And what will it mean if he gets elected.

Ed Gillespie: [00:18:21] If I were in Alabamam and I would not be able to bring myself to vote for Roy Moore. I couldn't vote for Doug Jones, but I wouldn't be able to bring myself to vote for him.

[00:18:34] Now Cory Gardner has at the senatorial...

David Axelrod: [00:18:38] Chairman of the DFCC, Senator from Colarado.

Ed Gillespie: [00:18:44] Yeah, yeah. They're not putting putting money into the race. I think that's you know that's the right decision.

David Axelrod: [00:18:51] And what if he gets elected should he be seated?

Ed Gillespie: [00:18:54] Again uncharted waters. I mean this is .

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO INSTITUTE OF POLITICS & CNN PRESENT

THE AXE FILES

David Axelrod: [00:18:58] Is it bad for the Republican Party either way?

Ed Gillespie: [00:19:02] You know I think given what Senator Franken has done and and Conyers and we'll see what others there are some other Democrats you know obviously you know are in the mix. You know politically I think that it's obviously going to be a challenge. And I think the you know the members of the Senate Republican Conference realize that they've made that clear. I was struck by by Senator Shelby and his comments yesterday.

David Axelrod: [00:19:32] The senior senator from Alabama said he could not he didn't vote vote in someone like Roy Moore but I'm trying to think through the politics of this. So everybody's now and we'll let the people of Alabama decide the people of Alabama decide. And then he comes to the Senate and then the Senate expels him with the president of the United States supporting him?

Ed Gillespie: [00:19:54] I don't know. Like I say I mean I've I've seen the statements various statements from leaders in the Senate.

[00:20:01] You know they said there will be an immediate investigation an ethics investigation and so that would run its course I assume again uncharted territory here.

David Axelrod: [00:20:13] But just putting your polit... your strategist hat on and you're one of the best doesn't create an enormous problem with the base of this sort of trump base of the Republican Party if more comes and then has expelled them presumably with a lot of Democratic votes to expel him as well as some Republicans.

Ed Gillespie: [00:20:34] Well look there there are these tensions and these crosscurrents clearly and it's true in both parties as you know.

[00:20:42] But this is an example where the there will be a segment of the electorate that will say you know we're not we're electing someone. There was an interesting piece I wish I could remember and give proper credit that I saw not too long ago that kind of talked about the difference between one of the differences between the elites and the rank and file voters whether they'd be in the Democratic or the liberal base of either party and said the mentality is look we're not electing someone. The elites may see it as well we're you know we have to be more virtuous and role models and that kind of thing. A lot of the electorate is saying we're just sending somebody there to do a job and to vote for tax cuts and conservative judges. And you know.

David Axelrod: [00:21:34] Some of those voters clearly resent being told that they should vote for him.

Ed Gillespie: [00:21:38] And that's a factor as well. There is a sense that you know people from outside of our state or commonwealth in my case you know we don't want folks telling us what we know who we can and cannot vote for.

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO INSTITUTE OF POLITICS & CNN PRESENT

THE AXE FILES

[00:21:52] We'll make that decision ourselves and there's a there's a backlash that that results from that. But I'm not minimizing the challenge I'm agreeing with you that this but these are some of the factors that contribute.

David Axelrod: [00:22:01] Before we leave this is it better for the Republican Party to take the hit and have a Democrat hold that seat for however long that Democrat does or to deal with having Roy Moore with all of his... And it's not just about his sexual harassment but about you know his comments on slavery and a whole range of other things.

Ed Gillespie: [00:22:26] In my view the just politically made clear to you in terms of him as a person. I could not vote for him. From a political perspective I don't think the you know the long term pain would be worth the short term gain of the seat politically. But again I don't you know my view as a Virginian is not going to have much of an impact you know in that regard.

David Axelrod: [00:22:53] Let's let's take a short break and we'll be right back with Ed Gillespie.

David Axelrod: [00:22:58] I want to return to your story so, Dick Arney as we talked about became one of the leaders of the sort of what was known as it may actually aggravate him to hear it said this. But the Gingrich revolution in 1994 and a linchpin of that campaign in 94 when the Republicans took over the house was something called the Contract with America. Right. You were deeply involved in drafting that. Tell me about that.

Ed Gillespie: [00:23:26] You know it was it was a very exciting time and Gingrich deserves a lot of credit as does Arney the two of them when they came together really formed a you know an alliance that was pretty powerful and their ability to work together in the staffs to work together. You know it was something that we hadn't really seen army got into leadership and became conference chairman of the House Republican Conference and Newt was the whip and they both believe very strongly that opposing President Clinton was not enough. That you had to come forward with a competing alternative agenda for governance. And they worked very hard in that regard to put forward ten bills that they would if Republicans took control of the House which remember at that point had not been the case for 40 year life for decades. It was a tectonic shifting of the play. It was and they felt that that was the necessary ingredient that had been missing was to not just run against President Clinton or run with a Republican presidential candidate but to come forward and say this is what we'll do if we're given the ability to govern and the responsibility of governing and so they went about bringing together the whole house Republican conference and candidates for Congress all across the country to craft an agenda that they could run on in a unified way and say we'll do this.

[00:24:46] And that was the genesis for the contract with America. I was involved in the drafting of it. I coauthored the book contract with America and I gave the names to the bills in the contract as part of kind of the marketing campaign. And it was very effective.

[00:25:03] This was before social media and so the the media kind of hook on it was an ad in TV Guide where you just tear it out it was like a cardboard cardstock insert that you could tear out. And the point was this is the contract keep it and keep tabs on us and see if we'll do these 10 things and hold us accountable. And it was a very successful effort.

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THE AXE FILES

David Axelrod: [00:25:31] Yeah it's unusual for a legislative party to be able to craft and every ever ever since there's always been this well why can't this why can't when Republicans are out or win. Why can't there be a coherent. I mean it's usually it takes a president to shape an agenda. That was that was unusual.

Ed Gillespie: [00:25:51] It was unusual. And I do think we were at a point because we've been out for 40 years. You know the the the... And we'd had three years of Republican presidencies because we had the you know President Reagan elected reelected and then President Bush for a third term essentially. And so the truth is it's the natural cycle but by the end of that third Republican presidency we've gotten a little flat. And that was and President Clinton was able to take advantage of that obviously to get elected. And so then this was a way to say here's some new ideas some new blood some things that you know that we haven't talked about in a while.

David Axelrod: [00:26:33] Let me just ask you one thing about the whole that whole period of time Gingrich was a very sharp edged character and he went hard after some of the leadership that had been there. Bob Michael who was the Republican leader there who ultimately replaced and so on and part of that was a much more aggressive stance toward Democrats. And you know I mean I for one and I look I know Newt and you know we've had delightful conversations not always agreeing but but it seems like there was a point of departure there where our politics in Washington got very very sort of hard edged and so rather than thinking of opponents across the aisle as as as colleagues who with whom you have disagreements it became much more sort of take no prisoners and so on, is that a fair assessment?

Ed Gillespie: [00:27:37] In some ways yes I would say you could go back a little further though to me in terms of my experience.

[00:27:44] I actually think the the rejection of John Tower as secretary of defense and the 80s in the 80s was was kind of an initial harbinger of some of that and a little bit of a break from the kind of traditional you know that to me was kind of a watershed moment and some of the Supreme Court and some of the court fights obviously. So Bork you know being a significant one in that regard too. So you know it's kind of a question what who started it. I do think that Gingrich took those tactics and aggressively applied them as well. And he used media. You know he was he kind of saw C-SPAN as an opportunity when the House floor opened up to C-SPAN attempting to to get a message one minute messages in the one minutes and the special orders takes vision to see C-SPAN as a weapon.

[00:28:46] But there's no doubt there was a sharpening of the differences and he wanted to highlight the differences.

David Axelrod: [00:28:53] Do you look back and say that was all for the good.

Ed Gillespie: [00:28:59] You know I tell you. Because when when we took control of the house there was still no good working relationships across the aisle. And you still had know bipartisan support you know things have the polarization has accelerated throughout the years. And I would say that was a moment of acceleration.

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO INSTITUTE OF POLITICS & CNN PRESENT

THE AXE FILES

[00:29:22] But again to my mind I would go back to the confirmations of tower and Borch and some other things although that one takes on a new dimension in today's context that's why I think Bork is maybe a more a more apt example.

[00:29:40] And you know it did accelerate it. But whether or not it was a reflection of you know or a cause. You know it may have been a reflection of what was going on in the electorate. Republicans were very frustrated having been out of power for 40 years and felt that you know the things that we had been doing weren't resulting in any change and that we had to do things differently. And you know Newt applied that with his approach to sharpen the differences. But to his credit I would say in that regard too and I'm not saying there's anything wrong sharpening differences but he did put forward these ten bills and say it's about the policy. These are policies that we will you know that we will enact and the Contract with America and the 94 midterm was not just about President Clinton. It was about these policies.

David Axelrod: [00:30:33] You you know you you've you've held many different positions in politics and out of politics in the in the in the 90s and 2000s you established yourself as a lobbying presence in town and first with Haley Barbour former DNC RNC chair and sorry and the former. And I guess he became governor of Mississippi after ever after all of that and then with Jack Quinn who had been counsel to Vice President Gore and you guys represented some of those sort of blue chip corporations in America including banks tobacco companies and so on. Say say a word about lobbyists and if you want to say a kind word about them because they're they're not there's a real jaundice in this country about the impact that lobbyists have had.

Ed Gillespie: [00:31:33] Well there's no doubt about it and look to my view as a conservative Republican you know I wish that the federal government did not have the effect on the economy and the direct impact on the economy that it doesn't many many different ways.

[00:31:48] But it does clearly and people have a right to petition their government. And so trade associations charitable foundations and others corporate America hire people to represent their interests before the government and the Congress. And it's become a big industry. There's no two ways about it. And you know one of the things that Jack and I did obviously informing Quinn Gillespie was to form a bipartisan firm to try to find ways to help serve clients on both sides of the aisle at the time it was somewhat unique not entirely unique but somewhat unique.

[00:32:28] And you know we took on folks who had big problems and tough challenges and tried to apply the things that we had learned in government and in campaigns about how to promote ideas and deliver a message and you know make it clear that this was a good thing not just for this company but you know why it would be good for the broader public whether it's job creation or or innovation.

David Axelrod: [00:32:56] One of the complaints is that people come in and out of government. You see a lot of an influx of a lot of lobbyists. Now you are in and out of government and in the 2000s and you for example and tell me if this is wrong but you are influential in sort of thinking through appointments to the FCC when Bush became president you'd represented telecommunications companies. Is that is that right.

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO INSTITUTE OF POLITICS & CNN PRESENT

THE AXE FILES

Ed Gillespie: [00:33:23] No I there was. I can't recall. I didn't really make personnel. There are folks who do that. I never lobbied on personnel because I didn't feel comfortable doing that. I lobbied on issues. I know a lot of the people who you know who ended up in a lot of those positions but I don't recall advocating for someone.

David Axelrod: [00:33:46] The reason I ask this is that this is sort of the swamp that President Trump talked about this sort of relation. And now it seems like that it is it has come back sort of with a vengeance lots of lobbyists there. And the question is I guess what you're saying is that you think the government has too much power and therefore lobbyists who try and influence it have a great deal of power too.

Ed Gillespie: [00:34:16] I don't know that they have a great deal of power. My point is you know I would I would prefer an economy where Washington weren't so central to the economic direction of the country. But it is. And you know people have a right literally a constitutional right to make their case to the government by the way people also do that through grassroots and through town hall meetings and go into their member of Congress.

David Axelrod: [00:34:47] But if you or if you are if you are Jack Gillespie, tavern owner, you would not have the influence that Philip Morris has when they hire Ed Gillespie.

Ed Gillespie: [00:34:58] But he was a member of NFIB. And you know he paid dues to NFIB and was proud of his membership as as you know it was a small business owner in the NFIB and they've got you know international national lobby for small the National Federation of Independent Businesses. So you know it's we tried to do work on behalf of clients that we you know we're proud of. And on issues that we felt were you know were good but we obviously it was our business. No two ways about it. And when I left what became QJ to go to work for President Bush in the White House. You know I had to sever all ties and I did not return to lobbying not because I think it's bad but I just it wasn't. I didn't enjoy it as much as I enjoy some other things that I do. And but we were very effective on behalf of our clients and we did a good job.

David Axelrod: [00:35:55] You mentioned your service with President George W. Bush. In fact you and I had parallel positions in the White House. I've mentioned before I'm always grateful that you in the transition were very open and invited me over as was President Bush toward President Obama. George W. Bush when I think of him you know I think of the guy who is pro trade was a real advocate for immigration reform. He believed in America's leadership role in the world. You know and I'm leaving out aside the wars which were decisions. I'm sure he took thinking they were part of that leadership in the world. And we could debate that for a long time whether that was the right or wrong decision. But it's striking how far the Republican Party under President Trump has has moved from those positions. And you know you you ran for governor in this past year in 2014 you ran against Senator Warner.

[00:37:14] You almost beat him. It was it was the most stunning race of 2014 nobody thought you had a chance including a lot of Republican donors who didn't give you the money that you probably needed to win you lost by a point or a little more than a tenth of a percentage point.

Ed Gillespie: [00:37:29] Not that anyone's counting.

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THE AXE FILES

David Axelrod: [00:37:29] Yes. You probably know the exact number but 2017 you're running for governor and you almost lose a primary for governor. You are. As established a figure in Virginia Republican politics as there is your former chairman of the Virginia party the consensus choice or at least thought to be for for governor and part of that was that you are a George W. Bush Republican establishment Republican. How stunning was that to find yourself in that position.

Ed Gillespie: [00:38:08] Well a couple of things. One you know. In 14 I was outspent you know by over ten million dollars because Republicans didn't think I had any chance to win. And in 79 the governor's race I was outspent by 10 million dollars because Democrats thought I could. And you know I was supposed to lose the Senate race by nine points and it was a neck and neck race. I was supposed to be in a neck and neck race in the governor's contest in this last November and lost by nine points. You know it's just so unpredictable. And it was unpredictable in terms of the primary. The you know the closeness of it I had made a conscious decision for it to be a closer contest and I don't think we're going to be that close. But I did not you know kind of go at my. And I had two opponents and that contributed to it as well because the third opponent took you know his votes would have been my vote.

David Axelrod: [00:39:05] But your principal challenge and the one you barely beat was Corey Stewart who have been so so outspoken that he's actually expelled from the Trump campaign which is really hard to do.

Ed Gillespie: [00:39:17] And I chose to not you know kind of attack him more to or to do any negative against him and also frankly not to spend that much money to to shepherd my my resources and to husband my campaign dollars for the general not because I was just taking it for granted. You know we had data that showed that we were in better shape than we were. But again that's one of the things the data is very unreliable these days and it's hard to model the electorate in an off off year primary.

David Axelrod: [00:39:47] I think that we should explain that polling is only as good as the models. And if your model is off in terms of your assumptions as to who's going to show. Right. Your polling can be off too and that was true in some of the state polling in 2000.

Ed Gillespie: [00:40:02] Exactly exactly. And a lot more of the people who had come out to vote in the Republican primary in Virginia for President Trump in the primary came out to vote again next year in the gubernatorial contest which we were not anticipating them coming back and they did. And that resulted in a much closer race because because my opponent was you know the running on Trump I was running on my own set of issues that I thought were more relevant frankly to Virginia in terms of the policies that we need and.

David Axelrod: [00:40:36] Mostly on economics mostly on economics. We're going to take another break and we'll be right back with Ed Gillespie.

David Axelrod: [00:40:42] Just a back up for a second. You never endorsed Donald Trump for president.

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THE AXE FILES

Ed Gillespie: [00:40:48] When he became the nominee, I did. And I'm a former RNC chairman and said I would support our nominee. And I did. And in fact I introduced Vice President Pence then Governor Pence said a couple of rallies in Virginia.

David Axelrod: [00:41:02] But you weren't seen by the Trump base in Virginia as a as a Trump person for that. That's fair to say. I mean seems to me that this primary, Ed, in Virginia really spoke to the sort of ongoing. I don't know if you call it a civil war but within the Republican Party and there are really very different. I mean there may be some commonality on issues of regulation and tax cuts and so on but on these issues that really propelled Trump trade immigration you know sort of the social divide it seems pretty profound in your primary race spoke to that.

Ed Gillespie: [00:41:49] Well you know the fact is you know I would have every day in the course of my campaign you know three Republicans would say to me you've got to stand up to President Trump. And everyday three Republicans would say you've got to stand up for President Trump and my mentality was I'm not running to be for or against President Trump. I'm running to be for the people of Virginia to be our next governor. And I really wanted to keep the focus on that. Almost impossible. Well to your point if you're not you know standing up for President Trump for his supporters you know they see you as not for him and it's not that I was not for him. It's just that I'm not against him. I wanted to be for Virginia and I wanted to keep the focus in such a tight rope tight rope to walk. And it may not be walkable. To be honest with you.

David Axelrod: [00:42:53] Yeah. He was in the state a lot because he has his golf club there he tends to stay at his property so he's in a state a lot. He never campaigned for you. I presume that you never asked him to campaign for you. Is that right?

Ed Gillespie: [00:43:09] That's correct. And you know never was. It was a point of discussion. The president did not ask to campaign he did not ask to come in.

[00:43:20] I know you know everybody thought about it remember the president didn't carry Virginia and highly unpopular in Northern Virginia and Northern Virginia where you know a third of the population.

[00:43:31] And so you know we had concluded that we didn't want to nationalize the race. You know I wanted the race to be about Virginia and that's by the way the norm in our Virginia governor's contest when you have you know the first.

[00:43:48] New Jersey has a race too. But there wasn't much of a race there. So all the chips were on the table in Virginia all the focus was on Virginia. And you know as as you know the 10 of the last gubernatorial elections in the year following the presidential election have gone to the party out of power out of the White House.

David Axelrod: [00:44:06] Right. 2013 was the exception, and with Terry McAuliffe.

Ed Gillespie: [00:44:11] And it was largely an outlier again because of an external factor which was the government shutdown which took place for the first 16 days of October which which I think had a big impact in terms of that outcome or it may have gone consistent with the norm.

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THE AXE FILES

[00:44:27] So I knew it was going to be you know a challenge you like when you started to run.

David Axelrod: [00:44:33] Your assumption was probably that Hillary Clinton was going to be president.

Ed Gillespie: [00:44:37] That was the conventional wisdom now is going to run regardless.

[00:44:41] But you know looking at all the you know the polling and everything like we've just said you know turned out to be wrong that was my you know that was my guess was that she was likely to win based on what you know what I was seeing. So I knew on know the day after the election the presidential election that the road just became a lot harder given the historic pattern in Virginia.

David Axelrod: [00:45:05] Well and the fact that as you said earlier that Trump was a divisive figure even within the Republican Party. So there were Republicans who probably were very vehemently embracing of him and Republicans who were recoiling from him.

Ed Gillespie: [00:45:22] And I was able to bring them all together you know if you look at the the exit surveys you know the fact is I got I think 95 percent of self-identified Republicans which is you know what you get when you've got a unified party nobody gets 100 percent even of their own party. I think I think Lieutenant Governor now governor like Northam was right around the same with Democrats. And we also had record high turnout. That was the most votes.

David Axelrod: [00:45:50] You did very well with independents when you ran for the Senate in 2014. Not so much in 2017.

Ed Gillespie: [00:45:58] I carried them in 17 but 50/48 narrow margin. But we got you know we turned out our vote.

[00:46:08] And so I was able to unify the party and get why not by not constantly talking I just had made a determination. I wanted to talk about my policies about Virginia and not get sucked into the national debate as best as I could. It's not easy.

David Axelrod: [00:46:24] But look you you know that I have to ask you about how you unify the party because the fact is that you you're the object of suspicion among the Trump base that was and there was a concern that they weren't going to come out in the fall. You embarked on a series of ads that are very controversial one about Ralph Northam your opponent who you know I know you've been friendly with him over the years you told me in advance of the race. I think it'll be a very gentlemanly race. But these weren't very gentlemanly ads. Harold Washington my old client in Chicago he's a politics ain't beanbag. Yeah that is certainly an example of that. But you ran ads around the issue after a Charlottesville of the Confederate statues and and the implication of the local communities should decide you yourself had said that you thought these statues might correct me if I'm wrong should perhaps come down. You think it should be up to local communities.

Ed Gillespie: [00:47:33] Let's talk about the statues for a second. It's an important issue and there's so many misperceptions about it so the reason it became an issue after Charlottesville is because my opponent Governor like Northam came out and said all the statue should come

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THE AXE FILES

down. And he and I both agreed that it should be a local decision that the localities should decide. But my view was that they should not all come down that we should add historical context to them. By the way that's a that's a that's an opinion shared by the current governor Terry McAuliffe and former governor Doug Wilder. So rather than take them all down add historical context don't I wouldn't if I were a city council or county Board of Supervisors spend the money to take them down because that's an expensive proposition. And on top of that there's a lot of misperception people don't understand because they saw the coverage from Charlottesville and people outside Virginia believe that the statues are all of Robert Lee or Stonewall Jackson or Jefferson Davis. They're not the statues that people really care most about all around Virginia and in city squares and county courthouses are to an anonymous soldier and they commemorate the soldiers who served and fought and died in the Civil War from that county or that city. And there are anonymous there's one in town on Prince Street and Washington.

[00:49:05] And there are 100 years old and there are landmarks and you know people don't support taking them down and in fact in the exit survey in an electorate that was a plus 11 Democratic electorate 60 percent said they thought that the statue should remain up versus...

David Axelrod: [00:49:24] But the ad you ran kind of caught the Zeit Geist of the president's position on this and then there were two other ads that you ran that were more controversial. One of them that was kind of a classic having having made ads. I recognize the style but it was a pretty inflammatory ad linking Northam to MS13 which is a gang that has had a presence in Virginia. And the issue of sanctuary cities because he cast the deciding vote for a bill that would allow communities to become sanctuary that would he cast a vote against a bill that would have banned.

[00:50:20] OK. So coming sanctuary city.

David Axelrod: [00:50:22] Right. But there are no sanctuary cities. I always said in Virginia. But the ad didn't say that the ad implied that somehow there was a link between that vote and the activities of MS13. And you know and. I know how you feel about immigrants because as we started out talking we were both the children of immigrants. Do you have, did you then or do you have now any any regrets about about having run that ad?

Ed Gillespie: [00:50:57] That the ad was about a vote that was cast on the floor of our state Senate in the same way by the way the statues became an issue when my opponent took a position for taking them all down. That's why it became an issue. Most Virginians do not agree with that. By the way in the Washington Post poll 44 percent of African-Americans in Virginia said they support taking the statue down. Forty percent of African-Americans favor keeping them up. But let me go back to my point is it was these are policy positions. My opponent cast a vote on the floor of the Senate deciding vote against a ban. And that bill would have allowed cities or counties to not cooperate with federal immigration authorities to deport someone here illegally who commits a violent crime. MS13 largely is here illegally and they terrorize the immigrant community themselves. And so my point is that will not make us safer when someone who is here and by the way from November to November for the year prior to the election there have been eight MS13-related gang murders in northern Virginia alone.

David Axelrod: [00:52:06] That had nothing to do with sanctuary cities though.

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THE AXE FILES

Ed Gillespie: [00:52:09] I didn't say that they have anything to do with sanctuary cities but we should be able to deport them if they are arrested was the point that his policy would not make us safer would make it harder for us to crack down on MS13.

David Axelrod: [00:52:21] If anybody if anybody if any community actually qualified as sanctuary cities and took the position that they wouldn't allow, they wouldn't turn over people who are violent crimes. So there are several steps to go there. I mean I just look as I said look you and I we've both been in tough campaigns. We've both I mean I think back at the ads I've done over the years and you know you take you shade you take liberties they're defensible on sort of as you're defending your, but you know what you're doing you're inflaming people.

Ed Gillespie: [00:52:54] It's not meant to inflame people when in fact the one of the things we saw was the people I was trying to get to were suburban women who had a law have a legitimate concern about public safety and MS 13 is a is a menace in Northern Virginia. You just read the news coverage. And in fact there was a fact check David on one of my statements I said there were 2000 MS 13 gang members in Northern Virginia in Fairfax County and posted a fact check they said there was 1400 there's 2000 gang members 1400 of them are MS13. Well that's more MS13 gang members than Fairfax County police officers.

David Axelrod: [00:53:33] Yes, but the point isn't that the point is.

Ed Gillespie: [00:53:35] You're saying it's a tenuous link.

David Axelrod: [00:53:37] Yes.

Ed Gillespie: [00:53:37] All right. That's fine. We can have that debate and we can have that argument we did. Now when I asked Ralph Northam though Governor elect Northam by the way let me say again we're we're having this conversation and I appreciate this conversation. I'm not. I'm rooting for him and I hope he's a good governor for us. I think he's a good man and I said that throughout the campaign but he cast this vote. And to my mind I would have voted for that ban. And when I asked him if there were a bill that were passed after a city or county declared itself sanctuary would he sign it. In that instance I asked him point blank in the third debate we got to ask each other two different questions and he wouldn't even say that he would sign it after the fact.

[00:54:26] Now a week out from the election in an interview with the media he said he would sign that bill should it come to his desk that he he reversed himself on his position on the issue because it's a I still to this day believe it's a legitimate issue that when someone cast the vote on the floor of the state senate they should be held accountable for that vote. I'm not saying that that vote caused a surge in MS 13 I'm saying allowing for that policy would make it harder for us to crack down on MS 13.

David Axelrod: [00:54:57] I know what you're saying but I don't know that anybody who saw that ad who had no other information would conclude that you were saying that they would conclude that somehow what Ralph Northam did was responsible for what MS13.

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THE AXE FILES

David Axelrod: [00:55:10] And if that's the case and you know I tried to make it clear in the first debate when Raplh said, when when Governor elect Northam's said we don't have sanctuary cities. I said That's right and we won't if I'm governor because I would sign that bill. You celebrated the veto of that bill. I didn't. I wasn't trying to pretend like that. That was the case.

David Axelrod: [00:55:34] But but to add that I certainly was was was very artfully drawn to leave an impression as was the third ad that you were criticized for which is the ad about the bill or the policy of the administration to return voting rights to two felons to serve their term and you chose the example of one person who got their rights back for exactly four months who had been a convicted pedophile pedophile and then commit another crime and four months later when this was 14 years or 16 years after the original offense committed another and lost the right who to vote also was linked to the right to own guns.

Ed Gillespie: [00:56:32] Yes, and that's the right that is of most concern right. Is that is that. And so this person was a convicted pedophile as you noted and then had his rights restored after having been arrested again for having one of the largest collections of child pornography in the history of the Commonwealth of Virginia. And my point is was and remains I'm for generous restoration of rights. I don't believe we should punish someone. Time and time again for a crime they committed once and if they have paid their debt to society and are living peaceably among us and productive members we want to welcome them back into society.

[00:57:11] And I had said that I would have a that's probably the case with most of the people who I mean he he gave that right back to thousands of people and I would too.

[00:57:23] But is there a line you draw where you would have a review because what Governor McAuliffe implemented and what Lieutenant then lieutenant governor Northam supported would and will continue as governor is an automatic blanket restoration of rights regardless of circumstance. And my point is are there circumstances where there should be a review before you put someone on a path to getting their gun rights restored. Should they. Should you treat a murderer the same as someone who got arrested for cocaine possession. Should you treat a convicted child molester in the review process or should you have a review process for that or someone who committed domestic violence with a weapon the same as someone who stole an iPhone. And I think there should be a line somewhere where there is a review and that was the point and that is a policy difference.

David Axelrod: [00:58:16] And but but you know the policy difference the policy debate is a worthy debate. Yeah ads, and again I'm a self admitted media consultant as media consultant. I've made these ads. The impression was that that they had you know that they had basically rearmed and re invested with rights this pedophile and the fact and he went out and committed more crimes. The fact is that he never voted and he didn't have so far as I know didn't buy a gun.

Ed Gillespie: [00:58:56] He pled after it. So he lost his rights again.

David Axelrod: [00:58:59] Yeah but but the point about it but it really it is you know he Northam who's a pediatric neurologist I feel affection for him because I have a child with epilepsy. So that's an important thing. Clearly he is not for arming pedophiles or giving no.

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THE AXE FILES

Ed Gillespie: [00:59:18] No he's not. But he is for a process that allows for sloppiness and recklessness to occur. And there were many instances and you know we chose one. You know you pick one for an ad and it's exemplifies the risk and the problem of the blanket automatic restoration of rights that he supports as opposed to a more discretionary approach for certain kinds of felons nonviolent felons.

[00:59:46] Frankly I would I would support no automatic restoration for them. But do you draw a line somewhere and say if someone is a rapist. If someone has committed a violent crime with a gun do you have a review of their application before there's an approval of putting them on a path to having their gun rights restored. And as I said I believe and I know him to be a good man. Ralph Northam and I hope he's an effective governor.

[01:00:13] But that was a policy difference and yes it was an evocative ad to illustrate one of the risks of that policy. But that's to your point. You know the nature of of campaigns.

[01:00:26] If I can make one of them go ahead stay with them because you touched on three areas the statues MS 13 and restoration of rights it's important for folks to know and this is one of the things that happens with media coverage and the narrative gets set. But the fact is I ran more ads about then lieutenant governor Northam missing important meetings of various panels and commissions on which he served as lieutenant governor and saying that he shouldn't get promoted if he missed his attendance was so bad at these meetings. I ran more ads about that than I ran about MS 13 in sanctuary cities combined. I ran more ads on economic opportunity my tax cut proposal upward mobility than on restoration of habitat as well as to the camp I ran in the last few weeks of the campaign I ran more ads on education than on statues and closing the education gap. And so you know. And yes the sanctuary cities MS 13 I'm pretty sure weren't running at the end of the campaign it was restoration of rights and the pedophile commercial yeah they're all these are all issues you know based on policies and votes cast by my opponent and policy positions taken. But the ads about his missing important votes as are missing important meanings as lieutenant governor. The ads about my being for tax cuts and him being against them. The ads about my wanting to close the education gap and his wanting to change the nature of testing as a response to that gap. None of those fit the narrative of the Trump narrative which is what the media is obsessed with right now.

[01:02:12] And so if it doesn't fit a narrative of to your point about Trump like kind of issues they don't get written about I unveiled 21 specific detailed policy proposals in the course of my campaign including some very innovative criminal justice reform.

David Axelrod: [01:02:27] Look I acknowledge all of that and I know the kind of campaign that you set out to run. The fact of the matter is that you were losing and you and you and you talked up your media in a way that would that would galvanize your base which was suspicious of you.

Ed Gillespie: [01:02:45] But not just galvanized today. What I was.

David Axelrod: [01:02:47] Well I agree with you you are going. You mentioned suburban suburban women who probably don't like pedophiles when they do street gangs.

Ed Gillespie: [01:02:55] But right.

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THE AXE FILES

David Axelrod: [01:02:56] But in the end of the day it kind of spectacularly backfired in it. Well I don't know if that I'll leave that for others to the county who carried Loudon County against Mark Warner in this very close weight loss by an urban county outside of Washington. You lost by 20 points.

Ed Gillespie: [01:03:16] Yeah much less urban than it used to be it's much more suburban.

David Axelrod: [01:03:19] Well there you go.

Ed Gillespie: [01:03:20] Yeah well look I also you know the fact is if turnout had been normal gubernatorial election turnout I got more votes for governor than any candidate in the history of the Commonwealth of Virginia ever except for.

David Axelrod: [01:03:39] Ralph Northam right who got.

Ed Gillespie: [01:03:40] And there was an explosion in turn out.

David Axelrod: [01:03:42] He got 300000 more than McAuliffe. I think you got 100000 more.

Ed Gillespie: [01:03:45] 100000 more than McAuliffe. And look there were you know we got 65000 new first time voters for a for a given gubernatorial race which is pretty big. He got 250000 first time. And so you can attribute that to those ads. I suspect there are other factors that come into play. Don't get me wrong I as a candidate I take responsibility for the loss. There's a lot of factors I think.

David Axelrod: [01:04:07] Let me ask you a question how much of that leave your tactics aside that we've we've we've beaten to death here, but how much of a factor was Trump himself and people galvanized to send a message to him.

Ed Gillespie: [01:04:23] Well you know I've seen data in that regard. And I think that was a big factor. And again I think this is something that folks are going to be sifting through. I take responsibility for the loss, and ...

David Axelrod: [01:04:36] Well if you were running in 2018 how would you process the Virginia election if you were running in one of these swing congressional districts or in a state.

Ed Gillespie: [01:04:43] Well I would look at you know look at the drop off with married women. As you know a Republican candidate should carry married women at about the same percentages as you carry men as a whole. I think there was about a nine point differential. You know that's a that's something that is going to be a challenge if that remains in effect. And you know the impact down ballot obviously you know I mean Northern Virginia it's like a neutron bomb went off and you know left the building standing. But all the Republican delegates got wiped out. Yes and that's true in the Richmond suburbs as well. And so you know again I think there are a lot of factors. I would say this to your point about you know the appeal of the ads and who is targeting them the ads were not what you always look for in a campaign is to get your base but also to appeal to the swing voters. The data that we had said that the concern about public safety in the northern Virginia suburbs. The fact is economically Virginia's got challenges. You may have just seen the data came out yesterday we had four straight years

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THE AXE FILES

now where more people moved out of Virginia than into Virginia. That's not the case in Northern Virginia and it doesn't feel that way here. And so the economy is not a big issue in Northern Virginia in the way it is in southwest Virginia or South Side or the Northern Neck or even Hampton Roads.

[01:06:06] The issue that looked like it was going to move voters in the suburbs of Northern Virginia was public safety and a growing concern over that. And that's where we put the focus now. Clearly it didn't work did it create a backlash. I don't think so but I don't know and I suspect no matter what ads we ran that those votes were coming and because of Trump. If you look at the exit data by 2 to 1 those who cast a vote based on their perception of the president or were sending a message it was two to one that those who were anti President Trump came out to vote. So if the data is accurate you know that that's a factor. You know I would say too if you look at you know I did pretty well in certain areas where you know in terms certainly turning out my turnout relative to the president. I also increased my share of the black vote between that you mentioned the Senate race and the gubernatorial race from 10 percent to 12 percent which was a focus of my campaign. I wish I'd gotten more. But the turnout was also high amongst African-Americans. Twenty percent turnout which you know which is high for a gubernatorial race. Little bit high not too high but the turnout in the in the suburbs and these 250000 first time gubernatorial election voters because of the off off election year who voted in a presidential campaign 250000 Democrats only 65000 Republicans. That to me is a telling number.

David Axelrod: [01:07:40] I ask you this as someone who likes likes you and admires you friend for some time back in 2007 10 years ago you did an interview and you said I think the fact is you know when a majority of voters aren't with you on an issue if you don't believe in it you shouldn't espouse it. And I always say it's better the best thing in politics is to run as who you are and the things that you believe in and win. And the worst thing in politics is to run as who you're not and things and on things you don't believe in and lose. So in reflecting I mean you've given a spirited defense for the things that you've done. Do you have any do you think back and say, "Gee, I wish I hadn't done this or I wish I hadn't done that. I don't think I was true to myself here.

Ed Gillespie: [01:08:37] I did not take positions that I do not believe in. You know so on immigration I think there's a big difference between sanctuary cities and the dreamers. I'm not for deporting the dreamers and I made that clear. And I know we can be a welcoming Commonwealth and a welcoming country and I don't think that these people should be punished for decisions made by their parents. Like I said my father was about eight years old. He didn't make that decision course. But at the same time I don't think we should have sanctuary cities. That's my position. I don't believe that. You know it's the right use of local taxpayer dollars to spend the money to take down the Civil War statues all across the commonwealth. And by the way there's hundreds of them. It's not just the ones in Richmond but there's hundreds of them and I would rather they be put in historic context and that we erect new statues. We've been on the right side of history. Doug Wilder is the first African-American governor elected in the history of the country we should have a statue to Doug Wilder in Richmond. We should, Dred Scott and Booker T Washington, as we should have statues to them. That's what I feel like. But I don't think that we should have the city spend the money to take down the statue. That's what I feel. And on restoration of rights I know we can be compassionate but at the same time discretionary. Now. What are those the issues that I would have chosen to run on as opposed to

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THE AXE FILES

the tax cuts. And you know and frankly you know even the criminal justice reform innovative proposals I put forward in that regard.

[01:10:12] You know that's where I'd rather the race have been about but what those weren't what was indicating we're going to move numbers.

David Axelrod: [01:10:19] And help as the president created an environment in which it's harder to run on those issues that you wanted to run rather than some of these more explosive issues?

Ed Gillespie: [01:10:27] Well, a couple of things some of those issues. One is those issues have been you know they reflect a more polarized environment. I think there's no doubt about that. And does the president contribute to a polarized environment? I think probably. And the other thing is that my bigger concern David is that it makes it harder to have a discussion about an issue like sanctuary cities. And there is the you know the Fox effect to a certain extent. So Fox News talks about sanctuary cities and it gets magnified there and there's almost this reaction then to marginalize it elsewhere. And it's a legitimate concern in my view. I think we should cooperate with federal authorities and I'm pro immigration and the son of an immigrant. But I don't think we should enforce the laws but it does make it harder to have a conversation about those issues. And I would say even you know on on statues you know I never talked about defending heritage because that's not how I see the issue or view it and I see the flag the Confederate flag a whole different way than these statues in the. And by the way. So to most Virginians in our city squares and at the county courthouses. But when the president tweeted about it himself he tweeted about heritage and that injected into the you know into the into the discussion in a way I would not and never did because to me it's about you know are you going to spend the money on you know bringing down these statues or put them in historical context. That's a that's a that's a better conversation to have around the commonwealth and I think would actually be a healthy conversation to have the conversation about historic context would probably be good for us.

[01:12:29] But that that tweet contributed to the you know again it polarized it even more in an issue that is a 60 30 issue even in the Washington Post.

David Axelrod: [01:12:41] Is there room for an Ed Gillespie. You know is there room for a reasonable man in this in this environment. And are you done with this now or are you done with running for public office?

Ed Gillespie: [01:12:53] I'm done with running for public office.

David Axelrod: [01:12:56] Would you encourage others to run for public office, knowing what you know and having gone through what you've gone through.

Ed Gillespie: [01:13:06] Probably not.

David Axelrod: [01:13:09] That's a sad statement coming from a guy who I know is so deeply. You've spent your life in this in this democracy.

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Ed Gillespie: [01:13:19] Yeah I just you know I think that and look this gets to a broader discussion to the the the way the media world is. There's no, you know there are no that's not fair to say there are no. Because the you know the nature of the way the race was covered in Northern Virginia versus the rest of the world is very very different than the way the national media environment and the you know they come in and they kind of pick up these issues in a state or in a in even locality and nationalize them in a way where they don't have the context and you don't have the proper understanding. People outside Virginia would not understand that the statues that people actually care about in Virginia are the ones that are over 100 years old generally in their town square or at their county courthouse. Not Robert Lee in Richmond. That's not the one or certainly not in Charlottesville. You're saying that is but that's that there's no room for nuance. There's no room for nuance there's no there is. And so everything gets cast. And you know there's you got to you know pick a side and you you know the way that people characterize you in the shorthand to get the clicks and that kind of thing what drives clicks and you're in the news business originally and you know was always the case that the product was not the paper. You and the advertisers you know were selling you. Now we're selling clicks and it has a very debilitating and I think cynical and corrosive effect on the ability to have an actual conversation about serious issues. And a lot of times the effect is just to try to shut down the conversation.

[01:15:06] And I think that's one of the things that I can tell you right now having run that is one of the things that energizes that Trump electorate that I know and campaigned with and I've you know one of the. By the way the campaign was a great experience so don't get me wrong I'm a better person for having done it. I'm a better person for having gone into the coal mines and spent the time with the miners I'm a better person for having campaigned and public housing communities I'm a better person for having gone to the Eastern Shore and spent the time with the watermen. But I can tell you that there are a lot of people who feel like they're not just being disagreed with but they are being disdained and that there are legitimate concerns about certain things are you know stifled and diminished and marginalized in a way that frustrates them. To the earlier conversation. I think you see some of that in the in the debate around Roy Moore and whether or not he wins or loses in Alabama that will be a significant factor in the mentality there because people feel like they are they are being marginalized demonized for having concerns by an elite that doesn't understand their you know their concerns.

David Axelrod: [01:16:15] And the president certainly understands that, and he and he is a tapestry to artful at tapping into it.

Ed Gillespie: [01:16:22] And ... the media, as much as they kind of hate it, but you know the ratings are good and the clicks are good. And it's you know there's a business aspect to it as well and it's it is a concern to me and that's a long answer of saying if having run a lot of campaigns myself. Now two statewide races as a candidate the atmosphere is definitely different in 17 than it was in 14. There's no two ways about it is a much more poisonous atmosphere and you don't know if there's causality or correlation. I'll leave that for others to determine. But I could not honestly say to someone that I like and think is a halfway decent human being you ought to run for office.

David Axelrod: [01:17:13] What about you. What are you what are you going to do next?

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Ed Gillespie: [01:17:16] Well I'm making up for lost time with with with my children and enjoying that and with Kathy. Like I said we met on a on a softball field. We've been married 30 years. She was an incredible surrogate on the campaign trail and we are truly blessed and I'm blessed. And I know I'd like to find a way where whatever talents I have and skills that I have in addition to supporting my family maybe can help in the not for profit sector and and help. You know I'd like to help people help me but I don't want to do politics per se but I help people who help me we've got state Senate races in Virginia in 19. We've got some congressional seats up this year that are going to be tough for us. I want to help some folks. But you know I've got an opportunity here to you know to really think about what is it I want to do and where do I want to try to make a difference for the country and the Commonwealth. I love and a lot of the relationships I've made in the course of the past year. I want to maintain and continue especially in the in the recovery community dealing with addiction and recovery. And in addressing the the achievement gap between minority students and white students that is way too pronounce.

David Axelrod: [01:18:37] So you're dealing with politics but you're not done with service in some form or fashion.

Ed Gillespie: [01:18:44] I hope not. If there's a way, adoption and foster care are areas so you know I made a lot of great friendships and relationships and that's one of the reasons I'm a better person even though I lost the race. You get to go places as a candidate that nobody gets to go. I would not. You know I would not have been in these in these recovery communities.

[01:19:08] You know talking to people dealing with addiction in the jails, out on the port with the you know with the with the pilot captains, and out you know with the oystermen and Tangier Island or in the coal mines and so you know it's transformative in a lot of ways and eye opening and I learned to see things from the perspective of different people and it changed my mind on a lot of things. So I'd like to keep that going somehow but without having to be a candidate.

David Axelrod: [01:19:38] Well you're going to go through the recovery of an entirely different sort. And I wish you the best of luck with that. Ed Gillespie thank you for being here. Thank you for being a board member at the Institute of Politics.

Ed Gillespie: [01:19:50] Thank you David. Thanks for let me be your 200 podcast. Congratulations. Thank you.