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The Axe Files - Ep. 94: John Weaver

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

DAVID AXELROD, "THE AXE FILES" HOST: Among the pantheon of maverick strategists in the Republican Party, John Weaver rises to the top of the list. He was involved in John McCain's insurrection against the party establishment in the year 2000, worked with McCain again in 2007 leading up to his presidential campaign. He was involved in John Huntsman's campaign in 2012 for president. And this year he worked for Governor John Kasich, who stood apart from a lot of the Republican field in his willingness to take on Donald Trump, and maybe a big part of the discussion after the election if as expected, Hillary Clinton should win. John came by the Institute of Politics the other day and we had a chance to talk about where we've been and where the Republican Party may be going.

John Weaver, welcome and welcome to the Institute of Politics. Good to have you. Tell me about Texas. You're a Texan and you grew up in Texas. How did you -- how'd you get from here to there from life in West Texas, was it?

JOHN WEAVER, REPUBLICAN STRATEGIST: That's right. Thanks, David. I'm honored to be here and I'm a big fan of the way you approach politics --

AXELROD: Thank you.

WEAVER: -- so thanks for having me.

AXELROD: Appreciate that. Likewise.

WEAVER: I grew up in a small town in West Texas. My parents were blue-collar working folks. My father's family pick cotton in Arkansas. They traveled a cotton-picking circuit in Arkansas and the Panhandle of Texas. My grandfather actually was from the Midwest Ohio and Indiana and was very well read. And growing up, he received every magazine you could get, Newsweek, Times, Mother Jones, Human Events, very curious.

AXELROD: Mother Jones, huh?

WEAVER: Everything. I mean he was left, right, middle. And so --

AXELROD: What does he do? Is he --

WEAVER: He was -- he worked in the oil fields as well but he was very curious intellectually. And I would race home from school and we would watch the news underneath an apricot tree in the backyard about the Vietnam War and all the issues that were raging in our country back then. And so I want to be involved in politics, but also I love sports. I ended up going to Texas A&M to be a sportswriter.

And I had no money, so I took a job after writing a very favorable story about a college professor running for Congress, Phil Gramm. He offered me \$200 a month and a place to live over his garage apartment. And fast forward to today, no sports writing, of course, and --

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AXELROD: Yes. That's too bad. That would be fun.

WEAVER: Exactly.

AXELROD: Yes.

WEAVER: I could be here for the World Series.

AXELROD: Exactly.

WEAVER: And so I worked for Phil. We had a very narrow Democratic primary for Congress where we got into the runoff by nine votes. We finished second, made the runoff by nine votes. He --

AXELROD: He was a Democrat?

WEAVER: He was a Democrat, a conservative Democrat, obviously. That was his first election in Congress. I work on his second one.

Out of college I went straight to the Air Force for three years and then he called me and asked me if I could find a way out which I did, to serve in the reserve for six years and was his political director when he ran for the U.S. Senate for John Tower's seat. I think you may remember that he resigned from the party, switch parties.

AXELROD: Yes. Well, we should -- there's a little bit of history there which was that he became the Democratic sponsor of Ronald Reagan's tax cut.

WEAVER: That's right.

AXELROD: And that didn't sit well with a lot of Democrats.

WEAVER: Right. No, he was the boll weevil I guess is the term that they use back then.

AXELROD: Yes.

WEAVER: Yes, that is exactly right, and helped get President Reagan's economic agenda passed through the Congress. Senator Tower surprised by announcing that he would not run again.

AXELROD: Before you get there, John, let me ask you this about yourself. Presumably, your family were Democrats?

WEAVER: They were, yes.

AXELROD: Yes. And did you consider yourself a Democrat?

WEAVER: I consider myself a Democrat, yes. We had a hard time with President Carter at the time, but I did, yes.

AXELROD: Yes. But as did most of Texas.

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WEAVER: Look, I've lived through Texas seeing ago from the bluest of blue states, to purple to red, and now we're back to see a purple again.

[00:05:00] AXELROD: Yes. We'll get to that.

WEAVER: Yes.

AXELROD: So, Gramm decides to run for that Senate seat. Now he's a Republican.

WEAVER: Now he's a Republican.

AXELROD: As you said he quit, regained his seat as a Republican.

WEAVER: Right.

AXELROD: Now he's a Republican and he runs for the Senate.

WEAVER: That's right. And Lloyd Doggett was the Democratic nominee.

AXELROD: Who's still in Congress today?

WEAVER: Still in Congress today.

AXELROD: Populist --

WEAVER: Populist, yes.

AXELROD: -- Democrat from the Austin area.

WEAVER: And Ronald Reagan was at the top of the ticket in Texas --

AXELROD: 1984.

WEAVER: 1984. Our mutual friends, Paul Begala and James Carville were doing Doggett.

AXELROD: Yes.

WEAVER: And Mark MacKinnon who was working for Doggett.

AXELROD: Yes.

WEAVER: That's how long I've know those rascals. And so we won, obviously. And then I went to work for Bill Clements and his comeback bid for governor in '86.

AXELROD: In Texas, yes.

WEAVER: In Texas as his political director, we narrowly won. Then they asked me to run the state party, which for -- and I was 25 years old, which I did. And then ran the Bush campaign against Mike Dukakis in Texas which was really the start of my career if I could put my finger on any place. Because the Bush

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family were -- they were so paranoid about Lloyd Bentsen. Remember, Dukakis picked Bentsen. The Dukakis-Bentsen ticket went up 16 points ahead of us in Texas.

AXELROD: Yes.

WEAVER: It was fool's gold. We all knew it. But because President Bush had lost to Lloyd Bentsen in the Senate race in 1970, they were paranoid about that. And so as a young man of 27 years old, I was reporting to Secretary Baker and I had a conference call once a week with Bob Mosbacher, Secretary Baker, et cetera. And so I didn't have to report through the normal channels. I got the extra attention. And because of that -- and we won -- my career got pushed fast.

AXELROD: You -- but it's interesting because you came out of mostly a communications --

WEAVER: Yes.

AXELROD: -- you came out from the communications in the same way I got into campaign work. But running a campaign on the presidential level in a state is largely a tactical assignment. So you needed to master the other elements of the campaign.

WEAVER: Well, I like you, David. I mean, there's not a job in politics that I haven't done. And so, you know, you learn tactics and all of that. But at the end of the day, it is a communication business. Even the tactics are related to communicating, how you grew people together, how you organize, how you fundraise, it all gets back to communication. And I think people have come at it that -- from that approach have a leg up.

AXELROD: And what you learned from Baker and in that group?

WEAVER: Discipline from Baker, as you can imagine.

AXELROD: Yes.

WEAVER: And I've heard from him periodically through the years. He's a tough character. Smart guy, think the world of him. But discipline, message discipline, campaign discipline, what you begin the day implementing, you finish, make sure you've implemented by the end of the day.

AXELROD: Now, I should ask you about the intervening decade, because in 2000 you ended up on the other side of the Bush family working for John McCain.

WEAVER: Yes.

AXELROD: So what do you do in between?

WEAVER: In between I opened my own company and had a number of U.S. Senate races. Senators -- at one time I had 10 senators as clients scattered around the country.

AXELROD: Doing general consulting?

WEAVER: General consulting. And they range from people like Trent Lott to Jeff Sessions, which is funny today, actually. And -- but I got involved with Phil Gramm's presidential campaign. And Phil was

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not my first choice but being a Texan and haven't gotten my career with Phil, I felt obligated to work for him. And John McCain was our national campaign chairman.

And there was so much fear in our campaign staff in dealing with Senator McCain that it ended up being assigned to me as the only person to be the John McCain whisperer in the campaign. So I traveled with him. He and I were often on the losing arguments with Phil Gramm on strategy and tactics, because while Phil was a very good Texas politician and a very good Senate strategist, he was a terrible strategist for himself. But I began -- I became close to John. And after we lost and after the '96 --

AXELROD: Well, what drew you to him? I mean, obviously you were thrown together, but what were the qualities that you saw in McCain that you like?

[00:10:01] WEAVER: I like his honor, I like his frankness. I thought quite frankly following President Clinton that somebody like John McCain would be a breath of fresh air and that if we could win a primary that he would win a general election one way. And so I try to get in to see him several times to get him to run for president and his staff rebuffed me. They wouldn't allow me in to see him.

AXELROD: Because they didn't want (inaudible).

WEAVER: Well, they didn't know who I was. Some (inaudible) from Texas who knew him from the grand campaign which was a disaster, they didn't want him to run because he has great committee assignments, they had a nice life. And finally, he called me out of the blue and said, how come I never hear from you? And I said, well, I've been trying to see you all these months. And they finally granted --

AXELROD: It's a parable about life in Washington.

WEAVER: Yes, exactly. So, they finally granted me like 10 minutes in the hallway in '97. And I said, look -- I said, here's a plan for how you can run in the primary. Here it is, a written version if it. I'll volunteer for free. Let's travel the country and go do this.

And he took it. Call me two months later, agreed to it. And that's how I became close to John. And that was a great fun campaign.

AXELROD: Did you presume at the time that George W. Bush, your governor, was going to run for president?

WEAVER: We had heard rumors of that. And quite frankly, having known George a long time, I couldn't imagine that, to be honest with you. But, you know, he had his team. Karl Rove was his strategist.

AXELROD: And you guys are sort of --

WEAVER: Well, we had a -- you know, we're not -- we're frenemies I guess is a way to put that, kind of way to put it. Any event -- I didn't think that George ultimately would run. I was wrong about that. But he -- Governor Bush did call me in '99 and asked me while I was working for John McCain.

And I told him I thought that Senator McCain will make a great president, had that to do with George. But that was a tough race, good race.

AXELROD: Well, I mean, you're minimizing it. It was like -- it was an incredible race because McCain

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sort of upended most of the rules of campaigning, campaign with the press -- literally sitting with the press the whole time. I mean, it's unthinkable today.

WEAVER: It is unthinkable today and it's a shame actually.

AXELROD: The Straight Talk Express was his bus.

WEAVER: Yes, which we dreamed up over a glass of bottle of Merlot one night about how to -- what do we name his bus. You know, it happened by accident. I like to say that was planned out. But we decided to do a bus tour in New Hampshire.

We need to get some traction there and we invited the press on. And because McCain, while he had low name I.D. nationally, three percent, because of who his father was, having been a prisoner of war, him coming back, he knew some of the big three reporters. Johnny Apple, he had great press relationships beyond what we had. And they want to ride with him. They want to be with him. Today, people would be pretty cynical --

AXELROD: And he was also very quotable.

WEAVER: He was very quotable. He was very quick. He's a very smart man. And so, we turn that into a 14-hour roving press conference basically. But we were being outspent six to 10 to one. So, it was our way to compete. And the Bush campaign decided to put George in a bubble and -- which is the worst thing they could do.

I don't know that they didn't have confidence in them or they did something that's totally opposite on what we were doing. But, you know, we were able to take New Hampshire and win by 19 points. And at one point, we --

AXELROD: Yes.

WEAVER: -- 66 to three. So, you know, you had to feel good about something like that.

AXELROD: Yes. Well, I mean, in -- I remembered very, very well because there was a sense that Bush was on the ropes and then came to South Carolina primary. I always said this was like the biggest invasion from the north since the Civil War with kind of K Street emptied out.

WEAVER: Yes.

AXELROD: And McCain was seen as a kind of a threatening figure by some of the institutional forces in Washington.

WEAVER: Yes. But, you know, they were so afraid of McCain-Feingold. As you remember, that was one of the --

AXELROD: Yes, campaign finance reform.

WEAVER: -- campaign finance reform. And so we had every special interest entity spending money against us, tobacco, religious leaders quote end quote like Jerry Falwell and Reverend Robertson" whatever spending money against us. I think in South Carolina we were outspent 36 to six -- 36 million to

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6 million.

[00:15:03] On the night of the New Hampshire -- on the afternoon of the New Hampshire primary, Tim Russert gave us the exit polls. And so, we went up to tell John the outcome. And he said, great, what's going to happen next? Then we said, both Salter and I in unison said the piano is going to fall on --

AXELROD: Mark Salter is John McCain's long time alter ego.

WEAVER: Yes, alter ego. Yes, great guy. So, we get to South Carolina and it's -- you know, when you grew up in Texas, you're in a tough campaign. You learn -- you know, you learn to give and to take and you have to grow a thick skin.

But what we endured and what he and his family endured is something that really scared me quite frankly. The nasty -- the scale of the nastiness, the personal --

AXELROD: Yes, intimations about illegitimate -- I don't want to say illegitimate, but children --

WEAVER: No. No. I just say that they -- the phone calls were made and leaflets passed out that he had a daughter with a hooker from the Philippines. And yet, they have a daughter with dark skin that they had adopted from Bangladesh who was with us on the campaign trail. And so, they would use that as evidence of the daughter that he had from that liaison. And he had a battle with the confederate flag going on at the same time. It was a really toxic stew.

AXELROD: He took a position against --

WEAVER: He took a position against which he regretted and came back later and apologized for.

AXELROD: Against taking the flag.

WEAVER: He did, he did. He took a political position which we recommended that he do quite frankly. It was a wrong thing to do. He went back and apologized. We felt like we had too much going on with everything else to take that on as well.

AXELROD: Yes, it's a tough one because the thing he was marketing was this candor, this willingness to tell like it is, the straight talk. And that seemed like a, that seemed like a very political position --

WEAVER: It is, it is. It was, it was a political position. And he -- I remember the day Bob Schieffer interviewed him on Face the Nation I believe and John got up and made a statement. He looked like he was back in (inaudible). So, he kind of gave it away as it was anyway.

Anyway, we lost South Carolina, we won Michigan. But, you know, to beat Bush, we had to knock him in three rounds, not win two of the first three.

AXELROD: Did you know when you lost South Carolina that probably this -- the thing was lost?

WEAVER: Probably, yes because of a resource allocation. Now, that night, I gathered our team. I said we're going to, you know, we're going to go kick their ass in Michigan. And Michigan was a pretty tough race, but we won that, 55-45.

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But at that point, John had decided he was going to live within McCain-Feingold rules even though the other side was not. And so, there was just no way that we could live off of hard dollars while the Bush campaign was living off anything that they could get. And so, we dragged on until middle of April, but it was done for.

AXELROD: And when McCain came back, what did you do in the interim between 2000 and 2008, just worked your business?

WEAVER: Worked my business. He decided to go back in the Senate though when he wanted to pass legislation that he cared about. So, I stayed on with his pack and led the effort on McCain-Feingold which we --

AXELROD: Passed.

WEAVER: -- which we passed. We had to get a discharge petition in the house. And you know how hard that is. We had to get signatures to get something to the floor.

But we got the passed. And with enough public support, we had town hall meetings around the country, force the president to sign it which he did in the middle of night. And he worked on patient's bill of rights which was passed to the Senate, et cetera.

AXELROD: Worked with Ted Kennedy quite a bit, worked with him on immigration reform --

WEAVER: He did but that was later. He did work with Senator Kennedy on a whole host of issues, so. He came back at the time he was the most popular political figure in the country. And up until 9/11, there was talk about whether or not he could run against the president or primary because, you know, on September 10th, President Bush's approval rating was below 30s.

AXELROD: Right.

WEAVER: 9/11 changed it all, that is as it should have. And it was pretty tough time though. The Bush White House leaned on my clients, called my clients, told them they couldn't use me.

So, I briefly switched parties. And because we'd worked with Dick Gephardt and others and I became close with Dick, but at the same, I came down with leukemia. And so, I was in and out of treatment for the next three years basically. And then by the time, you get to pass it, pass the 2004 convention. It looked like John could run again. So, I resumed the activity running that effort.

[00:20:07] AXELROD: Before you get to that and I want to talk to you about that, you've been pretty candid about not just the challenges of -- not just your political challenges, not just the challenge of dealing with leukemia, but the toll that politics took on your personal life and your family. And I only raise that because I identify with it. And I don't think people realize how seductive this life is and how exacting it is. And so, I wanted to ask you about that.

WEAVER: Well, it's a touchy subject because I'd look back now and speak for myself. You put things as a priority at the moment of your life. That with history and reflection would not be the most important.

I have a fantastic daughter who's 22, Syracuse graduate in Los Angeles making her own way. And I didn't give her the time that she needed. Now, we're closer today. But I didn't give her that time. And my

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first wife passed away with multiple sclerosis.

So, it was tough, you know. And in hindsight -- and I tell this to young people getting involved in politics now, don't make gods of the people you work for, don't put people in pedestals. Give it your all, but make sure you prioritize what's important.

AXELROD: We're going to take a short break and we'll be back with John Weaver.

Just to pick up on your point, you know, my -- I wrote a book a couple of years ago about my life in politics. And I talked about this that, you know, I think I'm embarrassed about the sacrifices that I asked my wife to make, my children to make. And at the time, you think, well, this is really important, you know, and it requires these sacrifices. And that that was a mistake. And I think you're right to impart that advice to young people going into this work is to maintain a sense of balance and, you know, family is forever.

WEAVER: Family is forever. It's even worse now though because at the time, well, we were in tough races like South Carolina and we took it personally and people say bad things about you, nothing like what's being said now on social media. And that damage the families and politics is very corrosive.

AXELROD: Yes.

WEAVER: And it keeps people away. You know, I've gotten death threats. I don't take them seriously. My family takes them seriously because these are cowards who live, you know, in a basement or something. But it's not a good place now.

AXELROD: You worked with McCain in 2007 toward the 2008 race. McCain, it seems to me and correct me if I'm wrong that he made some decisions along the way as to what he would have to do in order to become the Republican nominee because it rattled the cage of the Republican establishment and then with some glee over time. But it seemed like he made sort of his peace with President Bush and the Bush political operation. He had been critical of the tax cuts of Bush passed in the midst of the war and had taken some other positions that were antithetical to the demonstration and he moved. It seemed like he moved and made his accommodation with the administration in order to smooth the way for his nomination, is that fair?

WEAVER: I think it's -- to some degree, it's fair. I mean, we started that in 2004, we looked at the landscape. He -- the president was having a very difficult time as you may remember. And there was talk about dumping Cheney from the ticket. And Senator McCain's numbers were still high. I called Mark McKinnon and said it's crazy that --

AXELROD: McKinnon was now who you worked with or worked against in 1994, was now on the Republican side working as a chief media guy for Bush.

WEAVER: Right, right. So, I called Mark and said it's crazy to have John McCain in the sidelines when he can help you. And he arranged for Mark and Karl Rove and I outside to have some coffee outside the White House where we cleared this up and got John on the road for the president.

And I think I made a big difference for him ultimately. He-- you know, he did come around on the tax cuts even though he had been critical about them before. But then going into '07, you have to remember that he was for the surge when he was not very popular.

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AXELROD: Yes.

WEAVER: OK. So, that was hurting us with independent voters. And he was for -- he was the lead author of McCain-Kennedy immigration reform --

AXELROD: Yes.

[00:25:00] WEAVER: -- twice. One time, we passed it out to the Senate. Second time was that we failed which was a scourge with base voters and the radio talk show hosts. And so, we were getting killed on both sides. We were losing independent support and they were being hurt among with our base.

And for the nominal frontrunner, that was a very difficult place to be. So in his mind, I don't know that he saw that he was taking the accommodating route because fighting for the surge against Rumsfeld at the time and then fighting for immigration reform against the base for our party. He thought he was like taking on a lot of water and he was.

AXELROD: Yes. Now, listen, I navigate -- even then, navigating your way through the Republican labyrinth is not easy. You didn't finish the campaign with him, what happened there?

WEAVER: It was a 13-year marriage it was -- time comes to an end. You know, we had people in the campaign team. The senator would come to me, he goes, why are these three people always calling me, criticizing what's going on? It -- does that represent a split in the campaign? And I would say, if you have 97 people here and three people here, why are you representing that as a split?

Many of the people who ultimately ended up in and around Donald Trump were involved in that. And I will say that senator -- the senator just felt like he needed to make a change. And I just want to -- look, it was difficult, he asked me to stay on. We had a totally different view where to take the campaign.

Terry Nelson and I wanted to break from the White House and start talking about the economy in a way that was different than what the Bush White House was talking about. Others wanted to go in a way that was more in tune with President Bush. It was a basic disagreement. And once he made that decision, that's it. It's his campaign.

AXELROD: It's -- I've -- you know, I've been in these positions. I'd say two things, one is it's the fact that you lasted for 13 years is kind of remarkable. Because my experience has been that when you go through a losing campaign with a candidate, oftentimes that's the end of the relationship. Even if you had a great relationship and even if you did a splendid job because, you know, the notion is, well, it is a new deal, we need a new team and so on so that becomes it. But it's hard -- I guess emotionally, it's hard to detach yourself when you poured yourself into something like this.

WEAVER: Well, it is. It was hard to watch because, look, there are two John McCains. Like there are two David Axelrods versus two John Weavers. There's a big one, we want to live up here.

AXELROD: Yes.

WEAVER: Sometimes, we live here, sometimes, we live in the basement. We don't want to live in the basement, do we? But sometimes, that happens.

Look, I think that John McCain of 2000, the big John McCain or John McCain who might not have

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selected Sarah Palin might've given Barack Obama a better run for his money.

AXELROD: Yes. I'm as fair as you pointed out, we're not great with the Bush in the '20s --

WEAVER: No, no.

AXELROD: -- for any Republican candidate. And then, you had the crash of --

WEAVER: And I had a crash. And then, you had Governor Palin as a running mate. But I think you could've made it more competitive. And I think everyone associated with the campaign would've felt better about themselves if you run a big campaign. The way to beat Barack Obama is to be bigger than him, not to be smaller.

AXELROD: You hooked up in 2012 with Jon Huntsman. So, you continued to seek out these sort of maverick candidates, what changed in the Republican Party between -- well, particular between 2000 and 2012 that made it difficult for a Huntsman to find space?

WEAVER: Well, you know, you --

AXELROD: Leaving aside his own liability or deficiencies as a candidate.

WEAVER: Yes. No, no. Look, I think Romney pretty much occupied a lot of that same space in the primary quite frankly. Because the Romney of 2008 where he'd run hard to the right against McCain in the primary, he had moved more center-right preparing for the 2012 battle. Now, he gave away some things that he didn't need to do, take down immigration. But he occupied that space.

You know, for someone like Jon Huntsman, I think it takes more ramp space and he had quite frankly to do this. It wasn't a particularly strong field in '12 as I recall. But Romney pretty much occupied that space.

AXELROD: And then this year, you were with the Governor Kasich. Now, I wish we'd clear something up, there was some reporting that you would first approach Trump or that you talk to Trump.

WEAVER: No, that never happened. I've never spoken to anybody with Donald Trump's campaign ever.

AXELROD: So, you hooked up with Kasich, why?

[00:30:08] WEAVER: I looked at the field and I thought, you know, here was a guy who in the time of economic anxiety because of his background connect with people. He was the perfect candidate to win in New Hampshire, do well in New Hampshire. He could govern --

AXELROD: Because there's a large independent contingent in New Hampshire.

WEAVER: Well, there's a large independent but there's also, you know, the voters up there take it very seriously and John Kasich is a guy who if you get to know him very well, were as well.

But David, I'm at a place in my life and maybe you are too that you want to work for people that you believe in and that can win in general election but can also govern. I stopped now working for people because I need the money or any those other kind of reasons, I have that luxury now. So I'm working for

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people that I could vote for.

AXELROD: Yes.

WEAVER: So I looked in John Kasich, he's a guy and now got to know him extremely well. He's a guy who not only could win in general election, he could unite disparate parts of the country and he could govern in a way that would make people proud.

AXELROD: So here's the paradox right now, you say he could win a general election and I think most people from most observers myself included believe that he would be a formidable general election candidate. The thing I never figured out was how he gets nominated in the Republican Party as it's constituted now because he -- even though the John Kasich of the earlier days was viewed as kind of a conservative maverick, you know, was now viewed as a center-right guy because he took Medicaid money for example on -- from ObamaCare in a series. He took more open outstretched hand view on immigration. And a whole bunch of things that (inaudible) in a party that didn't seem very moderate.

WEAVER: Yes. Well, again I guess it gets back to who's making the definitions. I know he would say and I would say he is a conservative because he takes problems and he solves them as opposed to putting your head in the sand and having ideological test (inaudible) with the ball forward.

But our path was pretty straightforward. We had to do well in New Hampshire. We had to do well in South Carolina and Michigan. We did well in New Hampshire.

And now what we didn't bargain for and no one bargain for this was that Donald Trump would actually run, that he would have this bargain with the cable networks and have \$2 billion in free coverage. And a second -- a strong second place finish coming from 13th place would get no coverage. That's not what's happened historically in a state like New Hampshire.

AXELROD: Let me ask you about this. I understand the point you're making, there'd been studies that said he get \$2 billion in free coverage and there was, you know wall-to-wall coverage of Donald Trump. It's also true that Donald Trump made himself available 24/7 calling into shows, appearing everywhere. Did he -- is that something only Donald Trump could've done?

WEAVER: Well, it's not that other campaigns did the same thing and they wouldn't take people on the air. Now there's some revisionism going on amongst some of our friends in the media about how tough they were on Donald Trump in the primary. The people that I have a lot of respect for and that's just not quite true.

They wouldn't allow anybody else to call in their Sunday shows or their morning shows. And they certainly didn't carry other candidates rallies live for hours. It shouldn't happen, they wouldn't do it. And it wasn't because Trump was lead at the time, when we got in, he was a 12, then they started covering.

I mean, what we live in now can do anything about it is some of the decision-makers in the media make more money when the rains go up. Maybe there's nothing wrong with that. That's not the way it used to be, that's the way it is today, not wanting about it, that mean it's rigged, it is what it is. But he also, you know, Trump went out and won the primary. Nobody is saying he didn't win it.

AXELROD: You know, it's funny on this. I always believe that television ads meant very little after Labor Day because the coverage of candidates was so intense that people are going to resolve whatever issues

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they had based on what they saw of the candidate --

WEAVER: Right.

AXELROD: -- in the day-to-day coverage less than, less than the ads. But he kind of advanced that whole schedule. He was getting general election level coverage even as a primary.

[00:35:00] WEAVER: He was, it's really breathtaking. Now we went on T.V. only for Kasich and we went on T.V. in July and August in New Hampshire. And as I told him, we do that, we're going to be in the teams by Labor Day and you'll be treated differently.

And we ran in the clear, nobody else went on the air. We got in the teams and he was treated differently. And I'm glad we did because television does move as, you know, about anybody can move numbers when you're not fighting the clutter of post Labor Day or in media. But sure -- I mean, Trump got tremendous coverage. Is it a fair or unfair, it is the way it was.

AXELROD: When did you, when did you kind of see the tsunami coming. When it is apparent to you that Trump was a guy who could become a runaway free train?

WEAVER: It was probably November, December. And, you know, we went after him first --

AXELROD: Of 2015?

WEAVER: -- of 2015. We went after him first, we also understood and planned that we could get to a contested convention we could beat him there. And we were on track to do that. Because there was a lot of people criticizing why you're still on the race. But the thought was, you know, the race is extended until there's a nominee, not just because primary season or caucus season and until you have actual delegates voting for the nominee. And it was also clear that as long as the field was, you know, 12 people, eight people, six people that he was going to get his 30 to 40 percent of the vote in every caucus or primary if he had his floor.

So we had to narrow the field and we thought quite frankly that we had him at a situation because he refused to start debating with us near the end of the primary when it narrowed down to three people. That if we get Cruz out of the race which Cruz agreed to the deal about Indiana campaigning and Indiana exchange that we would take Oregon and Washington, et cetera. That we could get Donald Trump 101. Now the odds are that we might not win but we could've forced a contested contention.

AXELROD: What is it -- describe to me the base that has -- that is now -- the Trump is. I kind of -- you know, people treated as if it is a new phenomenon. It seems to me we saw some of those crowds in 2008 at Palin rallies, we saw them in that McCain event where he challenged the woman up in Minnesota late in the campaign.

WEAVER: Well, and, you know, we've seen this, we've seen this throughout American history when there's economic anxiety. George Wallace drew crowds like this, OK? It wasn't just economic anxiety. People feel lost, you know, with themselves or where they fit into the world.

And then, when do you have good demagogues to play under that, it's easy for them to be motivated. And we know who they are, you know, they -- and forcefully they've been taking advantage of, most of our white high school educated men in our party that feel as if the countries moved in the direction they're

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not comfortable with. They're unhappy or uneasy about their place in the world as globalization has taken effect.

AXELROD: And technology.

WEAVER: And technology. You know, it fits into what we already know about the growing gap between the haves and the have-nots. People that don't have access to education that will have the same access to their government. It follows along with becoming more cynical about all the things that they used to believe in. Whether it was their church or their bank or their government or what have you.

They've been disappointed every step of the way, and then you have a party who's misled them for the last 20 years about the things that they're going to change in Washington with no intention of changing them and knowing that they can't change them. And so it all balled up into kind of a cynical stew. I'd say that represents about 25 percent of our party.

And, you know, he's getting the vote, he's getting on top of that, our loyal Republicans people who just can't make themselves before Secretary Clinton or can't see another route quite frankly. But it's about 25 percent of our party and it's a significant part.

AXELROD: Where do you, where do you see this race now in the closing days of the race?

WEAVER: Yes. Well, it certainly appears for everything that I'm reading and hearing and saying that she has a significant national lead. You don't care more about electoral votes and I think she's going to be second.

AXELROD: And, you know, (inaudible) in the constitution.

WEAVER: Yes, thank you. And I think she's going to be somewhere north of 340 electoral votes.

AXELROD: Which would be an electoral landslide.

WEAVER: In the world that we live in today, yes I think so. I think she'll win Florida, North Carolina, Virginia, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Wisconsin, Arizona, Colorado. He won't -- I don't know about Utah but I think Trump could finish third in Utah.

[00:40:02] WEAVER: Because Evan McMullin, an independent candidate with ties -- who is a Mormon --

WEAVER: Who's (inaudible) the LDS community could finish first or second.

AXELROD: Yes.

WEAVER: Yes.

AXELROD: What does that -- well, before I leave to those you're sort of a survey of the states, talk about Texas because there's been supposedly lately that suggest Texas is close which is been kind of stunning because it's been such a solid bastion for the Republican Party for a long time.

WEAVER: Well, the Hispanic population and the Asian population along with the normal demographic changes that we're seeing with younger voters et cetera catching up in Texas now. Romney won by 16,

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McCain by 12, so you would think well, this is out of reach. The public polling of the last two weeks have had her I think on average behind by three points.

The Clintons have a long fascination with Texas because they both work for George McGovern in Texas in '72. And having been governor of Arkansas they'll have a lot of, you know, ties there from their days in Little Rock. I don't believe it but it wouldn't shock me if he lost because I don't think he's finished trying to ball her based down. He has another two weeks to see if he can quite get the scientific project to its full completion.

AXELROD: You give him a lot of credit there. We we're going to take another a short break. We'll be back with John Weaver.

So, let's assume that you're right and that the -- and that Hillary Clinton wins a substantial victory on November 8th. Where does that leave the Republican Party? And what is the mean in terms of governance for the next four years?

WEAVER: Well, let me take the government's park first because while it's impossible to see how well it's going to go it's the easier of the two questions. I believe she's going to win in electoral landslide and be the most unpopular president elected our nation's history. She's quite the paradox.

And unfortunately, instead of saying this is opportunity for the Republicans to do a little self-introspection, a chance to look beyond ourselves and to play and to rise to the moment which would help us grow nationally. The instinct will be to throw land mines not to govern and to cause problems above and beyond being just a normal loyal opposition ideologically.

AXELROD: Isn't this John, because this may segue into the second part of my question. Isn't part of the reason that may happen is that right now -- and we've seen it for last (inaudible) that here's the thing that held Republicans together was not some unified vision of how to move forward but anti-Obamasm and all the factions could agree on that. And presumably they -- many of them will agree on anti-Clintonism which is easier than figuring out sort of who you are as a party?

WEAVER: Right. No, I think that's exactly right. I mean, we could have been devoid of ideas really since the Reagan administration as a party. That's a long time. And we've been running on Reaganism since then and not applying conservative principles to the issues and concerns that people care about whether it's student debt or climate change or any number of issues.

AXELROD: Well, climate change is a -- there's no kind of intended heated debate within your party as to how valid a threat it really is.

WEAVER: That is, absolutely. So, to your point, yes it's going to be easy to do that. Now, Secretary Clinton, you know, they had a view of her similar when she was elected to the U.S. Senate and she surprised people by her ability to work across the aisle, by her willingness to role personally use and get things done. And you and I were talking earlier what fits within her well house is not being the eloquent visionary but being the apparatchik that I think it's the --

AXELROD: When she's pragmatic.

WEAVER: Pragmatic. And I suspect, I certainly don't know this, that she will put Republicans in the box because she'll moved to the center to find some issues that will -- that you would think that they would

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work with her on. Must my guess is that most of them won't and that it cause problem.

Back to our party, we're in existential crisis in our party. Imagine if Joe McCarthy was the nominee of our party in 1952. And that's what we're dealing with but instead of, you know, obviously Joe Stalin wouldn't be conducting himself to say why he (inaudible). But that that's where we are as a party.

And the damage is done demographically into our long term chances not just on whether we can win national elections to be a governing party but how we conduct ourselves as a party, and how we can appeal to people, what we stand for as people. That's the crisis that we are in. If we can fix those elections we'll come later.

[00:45:02] AXELROD: The -- we were talking earlier about the dilemma of Paul Ryan who obviously he's charted some -- a different course than Trump and he's challenge Trump at times on various things Trump said. He's now announced to his caucus or his -- some weeks ago announced to his caucus that he wouldn't be campaigning for or with Trump. They were concentrating on the house races that was met with some disgruntlement among some members of his caucus. And he's likely to lose a bunch allies in those election because the most vulnerable Republicans happen to be more of the center, right? Suburban Republicans who could get swept up in a Clinton victory. Where does that leave Paul -- Paul Ryan?

AXELROD: Well, he has the worst job in the world. There's no doubt about it and is going to be much tougher post-election. One, I don't think Trump is going to go quietly into the night. Why would we believe that?

And secondly, as you said, the base within the house, the caucus, the conference is going to be very difficult for Paul. At the end of the day, Paul -- my advice to Paul, if you asked me, would be to (inaudible) himself be true. And hopefully, he does that because that's better for the party and better for himself, but I don't know how he's going to manage that idiom while staying as a speaker.

AXELROD: Yes. So do you -- could you foresee some circumstances where he doesn't stand for a speaker?

WEAVER: I could see that and it would not be good for the party because you look at what's behind him, it's not healthy, but I can certainly see that. There was a story today and hopefully it's not true, that the Trump forces, the (inaudible) around Trump might ask the house not to ratify the results of the election.

AXELROD: There's some --

WEAVER: Which would be insane.

AXELROD: If Ryan chooses not to run for speaker, would that be a signal to you that he is seriously considering running for president?

WEAVER: Sure, of course, of course.

AXELROD: Speaking of running for president, how about your guy? You know, James Carville, the aforementioned Carville once said that running for president is like having sex, you don't just do it once. Do you think that he -- this was actually his third, he did look at the presidency once before --

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WEAVER: He did.

AXELROD: -- this last time. Do you see him leading the sort of movement to rehabilitate the Republican Party after a defeat?

WEAVER: Yes. Well, as you know David, you can't make a plan about running for president this far out and it would be full hearty to do so. And certainly, the governor has not done so.

Now, he has signaled and I expect to see him put both feet into this fight about the heart and soul of the party which will not be for the faint of heart. I do expect to see him do that. He's going to work his tail off to help the president past TPP and the lame duck if we can get it up. And he has two more years as governor. And he intends to be as innovative and inclusive and hopefully as successful in his last two years as he has been in his first six. Those are things that are on his agenda right now.

AXELROD: Could you see another campaign?

WEAVER: Well, I could see it. That's what I get paid to do. And of course -- I mean, the people around him want him to run again. And, you know, our party, as you've seen, we're devoid of surrogates at the national level, this cycle. Next to the speaker, he's been the guy most in demand to campaigning around the country. He's cutting T.V. commercials today for 10 U.S. senate candidates.

So could I see him doing it again? Yes. Could he? I'm not sure he's there yet.

AXELROD: The -- he is -- he's probably been as outspoken an opponent of Trump since Trump emerged as the nominee. He -- the convention was in his home state, in Cleveland, he refused to appear at the convention. He has thoroughly disavowed Trump.

Trump has renounced the state chair in Ohio which is -- it seems to self-destructive given the fact that that's a pivotal state, but nonetheless, he's done that. Do you expect that there will be an organized effort to punish Kasich if he ran again because he didn't embrace Trump?

WEAVER: Well, the chairman of the party threatened as much --

AXELROD: You're talking about Reince Priebus?

[00:49:59] WEAVER: Yes, maybe three weeks ago. And we had a pretty strong response back to him about that. I don't expect it to be at the organized national level. But look, as you know, if you stake out a position based on principle that runs against the thought within your party, you're going to pay a price for it. Does Governor Kasich think that he's not going to pay a price for not attending the convention, for speaking out against both the tone and the policy differences that he has with Donald Trump? Sure, he does but he doesn't care about that.

AXELROD: But that -- as a practical matter, would that be an impediment toward his -- to his running again?

WEAVER: No, I don't think so.

AXELROD: And what about -- you mentioned Priebus, do you think that he will be the chair? There's going to be an election for chairman after this election, will he be the chairman?

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WEAVER: Well, we don't know if he's going to run again. I would suspect and hope that --

AXELROD: He kind of intimated that he was planning --

WEAVER: Yes, he did, he did. But let's see what happens after you get another landslide loss.

AXELROD: Would -- how much responsibility you think you would bear for that?

WEAVER: Well, look -- I mean, he in our view at least he greased the wheels for much of what happened with Trump. He was so concerned about Donald Trump running as independent, that he forced a pledge upon the rest of the field. He does speak out against the tone and rhetoric and wrongheaded policies of Donald Trump throughout the primary system, and he called the race over in the fourth quarter. You know, I think the Bernie Sanders people may have complaints about Debbie Wasserman Schultz, but I don't recall her doing something like that.

AXELROD: And how much of your time is going to be spent on this project, the Kasich project, the rehabilitation of the party project in the next few years?

WEAVER: Probably half at least. I mean, you care about the party, you've invested your whole life in politics in a party, we need a viable two-party system that is honorable. You know, I won't oppose Hillary Clinton's policies and the policies of the people that you've helped elect for the right reasons and not because of what we read about on Twitter today and those things.

AXELROD: Well, John Weaver, it's been great to have you and both here at the IOP and on this podcast. I have a feeling that we'll be talking quite a bit in the next few years as all these things get sorted out.

WEAVER: David, thanks for having me.

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