

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO INSTITUTE OF POLITICS & CNN PRESENT

THE AXE FILES

The Axe Files - Ep. 67: Hugh Hewitt

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[00:00:08] 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: When you say conservative talk radio it conjures up images of Rush Limbaugh and Sean Hannity. But, one of the most thoughtful interesting presences on -- on conservative talk radio has been Hugh Hewitt. Who had a long pedigree in government and politics as an aide to Richard Nixon after his presidency, working in the Reagan White House, in the White House counsel's office.

He is a guy with an extraordinary set of associations and a fluent grasp of policy. I don't agree with him on a lot of it, but I respect him for the intensity and depth with which he thinks about it. I caught up with Hugh at the Republican national convention in Cleveland and we talked about his life and where we are in our politics today.

Hugh Hewitt we're here in your home town for the Republican Convention. You must still be buzzing with Cavaliers fervor ...

HEWITT: Had a million people downtown David Axelrod, a million people and not one arrest for drunk and disorderly during the parade. The night of the championship they had five, but I'm actually from Warren Ohio but I came to every Browns game from 1965 to 1974, so I know my way around downtown a little bit.

AXELROD: Yeah, so you got some of the Jimmy brown years.

HEWITT: I -- unfortunately he retired in '64 and I can't remember seeing. I had Leroy Kelly and Ernie Green, a little bit Frank Ryan but not Jimmy Brown.

AXELROD: I grew up in New York and there was -- and Sam Huff was the middle line backer for the Giants and the -- every time they played the Browns of the story -- there was like no one else on the field. It was just Jimmy Brown and Sam Huff ...

HEWITT: Sam Huff. Yes.

AXELROD: So ...

HEWITT: And, Wayington (sp) would show up in a few of those stories but ...

AXELROD: Yes, yes. But -- so tell me about growing up around here? Tell me about how you grew up?

HEWITT: Warren Ohio is a steel town of about, now 40,000 -- maybe 70,000 when I was in -- born in 1956 and left town in 1974 to go to school. Irish Catholic, my dad's a lawyer and my mom was a nurse and my dad was part of firm that's been in Warren Ohio for 150 years. All four of my grandparents are from Ashtabula Ohio which is a port town. One was a fireman, never voted for a Republican in his life. He lived to be 101, so I have to go another 40 years to catch up and offset him.

AXELROD: Now was there a connection between not voting for a Republican and living 101 years?

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HEWITT: No it was a -- there was an FDR connection. He had a job during the depression and that was everything. So, he was a union Democrat, a fireman.

AXELROD: There was a whole generation of folks like that.

HEWITT: That's it, he could not understand what had happened to me. AT (sp) was the last man in America named Adolf, he was a German catholic. And, he changed his name after the war began. But, he became this democrat, my other grandfather for whom I'm named, was a republican judge, and their kids got married. One was protestant catholic -- protestant Irish and one was catholic Irish. So it was kind of a merger of opposites in the beginning. But Warren is a great place to grow up. Tight Irish catholic community, as you have in Chicago. I went to Catholic schools, nuns the whole deal -- the priests. And, then followed my brother to Harvard.

AXELROD: Yeah, I was surprised by that. You had all the ear marks of a domer, and I don't understand how you escaped -- or they escaped you?

HEWITT: I had so many classmates go to Notre Dame. Keiland Garvey (sp), O'neil (sp) and Molly McGuire (sp) who maybe listening -- I mean they went. It was the first year they admitted women, first for year class of women to get through. And, it was a very powerful lure. But, my brother had gone to Harvard beforehand and so I had gone to the campus and liked it and thought this is -- this is more fun.

My dad had gone to Oberlin, as had my oldest brother. And Oberlin had gone crazy, so that wasn't on the picture.

AXELROD: Yeah, yeah. You -- you know as I was preparing to talk to you today, what struck me is, you are like a real life Zelig (sp). At every stage in your life you interacted with these people who ended up being very prominent in our history and including your roommates at Harvard. Talk about them?

HEWITT: Mark Gearan was Bill Clinton's Deputy Chief of Staff and then his Comms Director when George Stephanopoulos took a different job. Then he went and became his peace corp. director, still very close to the Clintons. Dan Poneman was on the national Security Council for George Herbert Walker Bush, for Bill Clinton and then came back as your Deputy energy Secretary of State.

AXELROD: Yeah, I had a lot of interactions with him.

HEWITT: Did you -- well the nuclear proliferation obviously. And, so Dan maybe the smartest guy I know. Mark and I just went to his 60th birthday and we were in a room full of people saying this is the smartest guy we have ever met. So that's Poneman.

AXELROD: I'm trying to figure out how you -- Grover Norquist was in the mix ...

HEWITT: Grover, John Brady (sp) and other political -- Grover lived across the hall from us in Winther pass (sp). And, so Harvard in the 70's was actually kind of ambidextrous politically. There was big strong conservative movement. Karl Rove came and taught me field school, because he was the chairman of the college republican. So in 1974 he came to Harvard and he taught field school to 50 freshmen on how to organize. And, this was kind of a Camelot thing, because you couldn't possibly win an election in Massachusetts in 1974.

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AXELROD: Yes.

HEWITT: But we tried. And, so Rove showed up. So there's the Zelig thing and the follow on to that is, I didn't have a job at the end of college and I didn't get into Michigan law school where I wanted to go, or Harvard. I got turned down. So I'm sitting on the step and Harvey Mansfield's son walks by and says what are you going to do?

I don't know I haven't got a job. He says I know a guy, which I think are the four most important words in America ...

AXELROD: Yes, exactly.

HEWITT: I know a guy ...

AXELROD: I'm from Chicago, I know the guy ...

HEWITT: I know a guy and have you ever considered. I know a guy named Ray Price whom you may have come across; Ray was President Nixon's Chief Speech Writer. He needs to hire a guy to be a research assistant in D.C. So I called up and made an appointment, went down and saw Ray. And, he had forgotten I was coming, which is not a good sign. And, he accepted a job from R.N. President Nixon in San Clemente. But, he took me along, via David Eisenhower, so I ended working for Richard Nixon and David Eisenhower first, but then Nixon in San Clemente.

AXELROD: And, how much exposure did you have to Nixon?

HEWITT: I spent three or four hours a day with him.

AXELROD: Really?

HEWITT: For a year and a half.

AXELROD: And, what was your impression of him?

HEWITT: Best boss I've ever had, without question. The most solicitous of and protective of my career. Nixon always had young people working for him in his exile. And, then we went to New York he had John Taylor and other -- Monica Crowley and other young people always working for him, because he knew there would come a time -- I don't know if President Obama has done this, where you've got -- he's been dead for 20 years. But, there are still people like me kicking around who can give a first-person interview and tell you. He was wonderful. Mrs. Nixon was wonderful. Julia is still a very close friend, David, will be here this week in fact.

AXELROD: How -- did he talk about his -- the -- his presidency and the way the presidency ended and Watergate and all of that stuff?

HEWITT: No, always forward. It's an interesting thing. We wrote a book called the real war. I came on after Frank Ann (sp) and Ken Cachegen (sp) and Diane Sawyer wrote with him RN, The Memoirs and after the Frost Nixon interviews. Frank Langella (sp) did such a terrific job of physically being -- I have to ask you a ...

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AXELROD: Did you feel that way?

HEWITT: Yeah, he was terrific. Kevin Spacey was good in Elvis Nixon as well but Langella got the awkwardness of President Nixon and the geniality -- forced geniality because he was such a shy man.

AXELROD: That always amazes me. You know that, I don't know if you saw Bryan Cranston's performance in that HBO movie All The Way.

HEWITT: No.

AXELROD: But if you grew up in that era as you and I did. And, you know I didn't know Lyndon Johnson but you -- you know we saw a lot of him.

HEWITT: Yes.

AXELROD: And he completely inhabited that character. Not just his physical being but also sort of his emotional being. I have such ...

HEWITT: That's saved on my thing (sp).

AXELROD: I have such a respect for actors to be able to ...

HEWITT: I just saw Brian Cranston in the infiltrator.

AXELROD: Yeah.

HEWITT: A terrific movie. He's just an amazing actor. You wouldn't know it from Malcom in the Middle, right? You are kind of expecting a light comedic ...

AXELROD: Well we all start somewhere you know?

HEWITT: Yeah. But interested, did you ever meet Nixon?

AXELROD: I never did.

HEWITT: In his trips through Chicago?

AXELROD: Never did, never did.

HEWITT: Because one he got out of exile, when he went New York and we moved -- I moved back to New York with him in 1980. He then would -- he took to the road and he went everywhere and I thought maybe in your Tribune days you might have covered ...

AXELROD: No I never did. It would have been interesting. I'd like to have met him. I know one story that the daily brothers tell is when Nixon was in the final throws of his presidency he flew to Chicago to make speech and no one would come meet him and Mayor Daily went out and met the plane. And, because he said, you know, the president of the United States is the President of the United States and that office demands respect ...

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HEWITT: Good for Daily.

AXELROD: Yeah.

HEWITT: Yeah, that is -- that's absolutely true. And, he lived to -- perfect lesson in that you are never out.

AXELROD: Yeah.

HEWITT: You know, you can always take another at bat. Because in 1974, this is before I got there four years. He almost died Phlebitis and he was deeply depressed and just worked his way out of it. Had to work, had to make some money, didn't have any money. San Clemente (cost specifica) just got put on the market by Gavin Herbert who bought it RN for \$67 million. He didn't sell it for \$67 million in 1978.

AXELROD: I'm sure not. Yeah, well probably one of the most the dogged and persistent figures in American political history.

HEWITT: Yeah, five times on the national ticket, only FDR did that. And so, he was -- we would talk about other people, he just wouldn't talk about Watergate. So he would talk about the world, the book we were working on was a foreign affairs book looking forward. And, Reagan would carry it around the 1980 campaign to signal to people that he had a worldview that was both -- and I think Trump could do this nicely as well. That he had a worldview that was more educated ...

AXELROD: Have you tried to tuck a book under Trumps arms?

HEWITT: I'm going to. Robert O'Brien's got a new book out who was Bolton's deputy at the U.N. called While America Slept and it's about foreign affairs. Because, I don't think Trump spends a lot of time on national security stuff at all.

How much time did you spend briefing up for the President?

AXELROD: You mean during the campaign?

HEWITT: Yeah, on national security stuff specifically.

AXELROD: You know, quite a bit. He had -- he had national security guys on his staff almost from the beginning. And you know he was a Senator he had -- he was on the foreign -- on the Foreign Relations Committee so he had staff. And so, you know, it wasn't a leap for him to, you know, as a candidate ...

HEWITT: You know the names. You're familiar -- that's why like Pence, he did 12 years on foreign affairs. So, he will bring -- and he's already brought some people with him to the campaign who will be more fluent in national security matters.

AXELROD: Yeah, I want to get to that in a minute. I want to finish your story and then I want to get to where we are today because I'm interested in Pence.

You went to law school you clerked on the DC circuit.

HEWITT: That's right.

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AXELROD: The second most prominent court in the country and you came into exposure with three future Supreme Court justices ...

HEWITT: This is the Zelig.

AXELROD: (inaudible) two future, I should -- Robert Bork never made it.

HEWITT: Never made it.

AXELROD: But Antonin Scalia ...

HEWITT: And Ruth Bader Ginsburg.

AXELROD: Ruth Bader Ginsburg. What were your impressions of them? They were very good to me. That circuit is very close. That's when Scalia and Ginsburg became friends. My judge originally was Roger Rob. Whom you won't remember but he had a stroke right before I arrived, so what you do in that case is the other judges give you cases until your judge recovers. In which case, he never permanently recovered, so I was permanently assigned to George Mackinnon, who was great -- became my defecto judge. But, judge Ginsburg, now Justice Ginsburg, Judge Scalia then, then eventually Justice Scalia, Judge Bork, Judge Starr, Judge Skelly Wright, they all gave us cases. And, we were great, they were terrific. And, they were judges, most of the time this is not controversial stuff, its most of the time its tax law and administrative law and administrative procedure act.

So they were wonderful and Scalia was the same person you see. And, Ruth Bader Ginsburg was the powerful intellectual who was sweetest person you ever want sit in the chambers with.

AXELROD: Were you surprised when she spoke out as she did this week? Or last week?

HEWITT: Yes, part of my ...

AXELROD: About Donald Trump.

HEWITT: Part of my Zelig experiences is having shared an office for a year with the chief justice of the united states and White House Counsel's office.

AXELROD: I was getting to that. No one will believe this by the way everybody is going to go back and say I want to check this out, because nobody could come into contact with so many historic figures in one lifetime.

HEWITT: But, the Chief, when I see them now. I haven't seen him often (inaudible). He never talks; you couldn't get a political comment out of him with a crane, even in the confines of the Metropolitan club with Fred Fielding. You could get a political comment out him. So I think Justice Ginsburg just let slip that -- and she regretted it, and she said she regretted it.

AXELROD: She said so. You have a high regard for her?

HEWITT: Yes. I don't agree with her decisions but she is a judge -- judge's judge.

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AXELROD: I want to talk about John Roberts your officemate. You went on to White House counsel's office and because you always have to be assigned someone is good be a major historical figure, they gave you an office with John Roberts. What was he like?

HEWITT: Well the Chief -- there were seven lawyers at that time and I got to protect the seal of the Presidents of the United States and John Roberts got to interpret the 25th amendment -- how to make an acting President. And, he's a genius and he's an affable wonderful amiable genius. And, I one of the few conservatives to defend the Obama care decision.

AXELROD: Yeah, I wan to ask you about that, because you know you were on debate panels this year. You may been sitting there when some of the candidates attacked Jeb Bush. I can't remember whether Donald Trump was one of them because John Roberts -- I think Donald Trump ...

HEWITT: Ted Cruz did it a lot. Senator Cruz did it a lot.

AXELROD: Yeah, was a -- essentially a traitor was the implication because of the Obama care decision.

HEWITT: They overlook Citizens United and a few other wonderful decisions that the Chief has handed down and they focused on that. But, I taught Constitutional law for 20 years and I believe in the principle that if you can avoid making a constitutional decision you avoid making a constitutional decision.

And, I don't believe it is without merit that there was an argument that you could uphold Obama care and he found it. It's tortured, but he found it, and there is that Marbury V Madison sort of save the court. And, after Bush V Gore they didn't really need to strike down the first African-American President central legislative achievement, ever. If they had any other way out and we can argue about this another time, another place about whether it's been a disaster or not. But I think the ruling will stand in centuries ahead as a very very wise ruling.

AXELROD: On of the things that worries me is just how our institutions are being sullied in the public -- in the public discourse, it's dangerous. And, you know, so I -- you know, just as you disagree with many of the -- I mean I'm not a constitutional scholar but there are things that I certainly would disagree with John Roberts about -- citizens United one of them. it really worries me that you know we go to the mattresses, as they said on the Godfather, right away, whenever we -- a decision is made that we -- that we might disagree with. And, I worry about where we are if the court system is treated way.

HEWITT: Did you review the state of the union when President Obama challenged citizens United and Judge Leo. Justice Alito said no.

AXELROD: I was there, yeah.

HEWITT: That was not a good moment institutionally.

AXELROD: Right.

HEWITT: The point could have been made a different way in a different setting. But, I don't think anyone actually saw it coming. If you read the speech, you wouldn't think, oh the justices will be right in front of me. It's not one of those things -- you never think about the Justices because they don't applaud, they just sit there.

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AXELROD: Right.

HEWITT: That was a bad moment and it's escalated from there. Now we're in a very interesting moment, because I approved of -- I think I came up with the hash tag, no hearings no votes. Because I don't want to fill the court until after. Although I think the President's nominee might be confirmed the day after the election.

AXELROD: Do you think that?

HEWITT: Yes.

AXELROD: I mean, I ...

HEWITT: Merrick Garland's a center left guy not a lefty.

AXELROD: No, I know Merrick Garland well.

HEWITT: Oh, you do ...

AXELROD: Because he's from -- first of all he's from Illinois, he was a protégé of Abner Mikva who just passed away.

HEWITT: Also on the DC circuit when I was on ...

AXELROD: Yeah, was a great guy, wonderful guy from Chicago. But, you know I got -- I had dinner with the Judge Garland when I was at the White House. Because even then you know he was someone who everyone was -- had their eye on, you know. Here's my question if you if there are no hearings how do you confirm a guy?

HEWITT: Because you're the Senate you'll have to do anything other than what you want to Senate makes its own rules. So if Mitch McConnell brings it to the floor and they confirm him, he's on.

AXELROD: So, you think that if Hillary Clinton were elected in November that they would move to confirm Garland ...

HEWITT: It would be my strong hope.

AXELROD: ... That she might appoint a younger and more progressive ...

HEWITT: That it -- be my hope that they would move immediately to confirm Judge Garland. Because, he is a liberal judge, he is not to the far left of the etiological (sp) spectrum. You're buddy Cass Sunstein, I think he would probably agree with me. I think a professor Sunstein as being in a Merrick Garland mode. He would rebuke an administrative agency if it got out of control.

AXELROD: Right.

HEWITT: some members of the academy, whom a President Clinton might be drawn to would not. And, so I -- there are some advantage to the constitutionalist in having Garland.

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AXELROD: Would you -- but you would be comfortable with Donald Trump appointing members of the Supreme Court.

HEWITT: I reviewed his list, it's an excellent list.

AXELROD: Do you think he reviewed his list?

HEWITT: Yes. But I don't know that he knows them or interviewed and I don't think he cares about Justices and judges, but he knows that it matters a great deal to my wing of the party. In fact we were having this discussion last night with a group of people who will remain nameless, media people about how George W. Bush presidency broke on Harriet Miers. I think it broke on Terry Schiavo and Katrina broke it again, but then Harriet Miers broke it a third time. So the year of terrible was 2005. But Harriet Miers was a moment where all of the conservatives came out with their long -- except me, I defended the President, I don't think you ever go against your president. Do you agree with that?

AXELROD: Well, not publically, I -- No, look I -- there aren't that many instances in which I've felt I can't think of many at all where I was uncomfortable with things that he's done. I've known him for a very long time. We've been friends for a long time and I'm proud of him. I, you know, again you and I have different views but I -- but I think that he's an honorable man and make the decisions based on what he thinks is best for the country.

HEWITT: What I like about you and Rove and Carville, a little shining you on here but not much. There are only three people who have won two presidential elections, been strategist -- you three. And, all three of you are defined by loyalty to the guy that brought you to the party and I've never heard Rove say a bad thing about Bush. I've never heard Carville say a bad thing either Clinton. I've never heard you say a bad thing about President Obama.

And, what's Carville's book called, Stickin'?

AXELROD: Yeah.

HEWITT: Yeah, it's a good book.

AXELROD: No, no those -- you know, I agree with you, I admire those guys for that. And, I can't speak to the relationship between James and Bill Clinton although I think it was very warm and close. You know you talk to the George W. Bush folks and to a person they're -- they feel very warmly about ...

HEWITT: Oh, they love the president, yeah.

AXELROD: You know, I have to tell you when I -- when I -- the day I was -- that the President was sworn in, I was in the speaker's office and George W. Bush came in and he had been terribly good to us. Terribly is the wrong word, he had been wonderful to us in the transition. And, I said, Mr. President I've been on television this morning and I've been talking about you. And, he said well I don't watch T.V. And, I said well let me tell you what I said and I said the way you guys have handled this transition to me was a real exercise in patriotism and I really appreciate it.

HEWITT: Did I tell you the story of the last Wednesday of his presidency?

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AXELROD: No.

HEWITT: He had a half dozen talk show hosts to the oval, for an hour and his -- he opened it up by saying, I asked you here because I want you to go easy on the new guy. He said, this is a hard job, he will grow in the job, this is an incredibly difficult job. So that -- that's an off the record but that's what it was. Go easy on the new guy, it's a hard job.

AXELROD: Yeah. No, I -- and President Obama said to me that the Bush's -- both President Bush's had given him a lesson in what being a former President is all about and how to conduct one's self as a former President.

HEWITT: Interesting.

AXELROD: I mean he really appreciated it.

HEWITT: Small club right?

AXELROD: Yeah, it a small club. I think people don't. You know you've been around ...

HEWITT: I've been around a disgraced former president in exile -- yeah, it's a pretty weird situation.

AXELROD: No, but you've also been around a White House and you know you worked for Ronald Reagan who wasn't a disgraced ex president. And, you know, I don't think people -- the one thing I learned there was regardless of what I felt about the record of a president, anyone who has to sit at that desk and deal with the things that come to that desk deserves respect, because it's such a hard job.

HEWITT: There's so much people don't know, and you've got -- you were so much closer, I'm telling you -- I'm a junior lawyer. I'm briefcase carrying, lowest ranking lawyer in the White House counsel's office, but you still see stuff everyday going up to fielding who takes it into the President and you just shake your head and say wow what a day they are having.

AXELROD: Yeah, yeah. Because I want to prove to you that I am -- that I respect capitalism, I'm going to take an ad break right now.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

Back with Hugh Hewitt, still sticking to your story. You made this, obviously very successful transition from government, from law to talk radio. How did that all come about?

HEWITT: My media career is accidental. Probably like -- a little bit like your political consulting career.

AXELROD: Yeah, everything ...

HEWITT: KFI radio called me up and said do you want to do a weekend talk show when I was in LA? Because I was running the Nixon Library, getting it built. And, someone will go run President Obama's library construction. Someone will be onsite, that was me for Nixon and I can talk. Do you want a weekend show? I said sure that beats working. And then the PBS affiliate heard me on the radio and they called me up and said do you want to do a television show at night for PBS in LA. And, I said that beats working. I said yes.

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And, then Salem called me up and offered me the nationally syndicated show in 2000 on the basis of the PBS show. And, then CNN in Salem did the deal on the basis of the Presidential debates and I knew television, so I was the natural candidate among the Salem people to ask the question. And, now I'm with NBC because of that experience. So, it's an accidental career and very very blessed.

AXELROD: Yeah, you enjoy, obviously, talk radio. Conservative talk radio has taken on a certain image and it's really been characterized mostly by Rush, maybe Glen Beck. But, you have a different kind of show and I've been on it and I appreciate the opportunity to talk about my book with you and you were very generous, which I ...

HEWITT: It was a great book. Believer is a -- I recommended it last night to people. I told them I was doing it because of your memo to the President in the Iowa campaign about how every election is a referendum on the last president. I said people need to -- that's what this is, right?

AXELROD: Yes. Well I mean, I came to realize late in the game that the antithesis of Barack Obama is Donald Trump and therefore he could get some traction in this race, even though President Obama's numbers are pretty good right now. But certainly within the Republican party, being this sort of anti Obama was a really appealing ...

[00:25:00] HEWITT: Yeah, it's so odd. You came on my show in February of 2015. And, we spent two hours talking about Believer. We did not mention the name Trump.

AXELROD: Yes.

HEWITT: I reread the transcript. Not one word about Trump.

AXELROD: I know. I know. I should have trusted my own - it just seemed too fantastic that he could step into the scene and dominate the way he has but if you think about it, given my rubric, I should treated him more seriously...

HEWITT: You should have predicted it.

AXELROD: ...from the beginning. I want to the presidential but before I do, I just want to finish this discussion on talk radio. How would you distinguish yourself, in your own mind, if you do, from what Rush does, from what some others do?

HEWITT: It's like a television network where different anchors have different styles and different shows. O'Reilly is different, Hannity, who is different from, let's say Brian Williams, who is different from Lester Holt, who is different from Jake Tapper. They're all different. They all have different styles. Rush is the maker of the feast. And I always remind people he's the anchor store of the mall that is talk radio. He's the Nordstrom.

And so if I'm the Sport Chalet in that mall, I'm very happy and grateful to Rush for inventing what was not know prior to 1989, a national talk show. Just didn't exist. Everything was local, governed by the Fairness Doctrine. In followed Michael Medved, my colleague at Salem Dennis Prager. They run cerebral shows that are give and take and pretty high elevated. Along comes Mark Levin, my buddy from DOJ days. And Mark's a constitutional genius. He's also sparkier than I am. He likes to mix it up a lot more.

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And I don't think I'm that interesting so I like guests. Some people are better monologists. And I can be interviewed, but I like to interview people and I could talk to you for 20 hours if we had the time, I'd talk to you for 20 hours. You know Green Room. It's just Green Room. My radio show is a Green Room on the air.

AXELROD: Yes.

HEWITT: As this podcast.

AXELROD: Yes. Yes. Yes.

HEWITT: So, there's a spectrum of talent out there on the radio, which is diverse as television with one exception. It's a more difficult medium for women because of the pitch of voice. It's a purely pitch of voice thing. It's harder to listen to women in the car for some reason. Laura Ingraham's made a career of it but it's one of the few that have succeeded. And then there are some people who are off the acceptable spectrum for me, I won't mention their names. They just - they dive into craziness and they are not productive participants in the public discussion.

AXELROD: But they get an audience.

HEWITT: They do. I mean you can sell anything. And that's left and right. There are people who are not - the amplification of the extremes in the country is not good. Social media has engineered it. Talk radio began it but social media has taken it to a new pitch. And we're living - we talked before this began - in perilous times because of the amplification of extremes. And it gets people - I don't want to buy into what President Clinton said about Rush after Oklahoma City. I never believed there was a cause and effect there but I do believe that generally the fringes of the internet are driving the conversation to extreme levels.

AXELROD: One of the things I remember about Rush was after - right after Obama got elected and (ph) we were in the midst of this epic economic crisis. He said well I'm rooting for him to fail and that struck me as wrong. You can argue well he was just saying ideologically, he has such a different view of where we should go as a country that I don't want him to succeed but if you believe in the one president at a time thing and especially at a time of crisis, that struck me as the wrong note to...

HEWITT: See, I always understood Rush's saying and it's probably because I come from his side of the ideological spectrum. I don't want him to be able to pass Obamacare. I don't want him to be able to pass the Dodd-Frank. I don't want him to be able to pass the stimulus. Because I didn't want him to pass any of those things either. So to that extent, I want him to fail. I don't want him to be - I pray for the president every day, I'm a Christian and I don't want him to be in any way assaulted or demeaned. But I don't want him to pass any more laws. I don't want him to get a Supreme Court Justice. I don't want anymore...

AXELROD: Well, you just got six more months, brother, so just hang in there.

HEWITT: (Laughs) I know. It's an interesting period of time. Are you talking to him often?

AXELROD: I talk to him from time to time.

HEWITT: I hope he starts to engage on the issue of race with right-wing conservative talkers like me

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because that's the conversation that has to happen. He needs to go and talk to a lot of people about Chicago, his experience - Joy Reid and I have become...

AXELROD: Yes?

HEWITT: ...yes, goofball friends. And we just have completely different experiences which (ph) share in common only a Harvard undergraduate for four years. But we can talk to each other. And left and right talking about race is the hardest thing to do.

AXELROD: Well, you know the one thing that I will tell you about him - and I've known him for 25 years, since he got back from Harvard law school - is he is always up for that. I mean he's up for dialogue. That is - that's really how he built his career and it's what he believes and sometimes in Washington it's hard to have those conversations, but...

[00:30:00] HEWITT: Television doesn't give me (ph) enough time. This is the problem. Even if you do 60 minutes, it's 20 minutes and they edit it down and that - you have to let the president talk a while.

AXELROD: I'll tell you one of the things that - one of the moments that I appreciated the most when I was there was - I don't know if you remember this seven-hour round table he had on the health care law before...

HEWITT: Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

AXELROD: ...over at the Blair House. And I thought this good. This is good.

HEWITT: And televised. Was that when Cantor got into it with...

AXELROD: Yes.

HEWITT: Eric Cantor got into it with him. (ph)

AXELROD: But it was a healthy exchange...

HEWITT: Do you remember when he sparked it up with Pence? He went to the Republican retreat in 2010 in Baltimore.

AXELROD: Yes. In Baltimore, yes.

HEWITT: And Mike Pence pushed at him and the president pushed back and it was good.

AXELROD: It was great. You know, he often says I like our system but boy, that Prime Minister's question time looks kind of fun.

HEWITT: It just does, doesn't it?

AXELROD: Yes. But we should talk about - since you raised the question of race - and the fact that we live in perilous times. As we sit here today, we just got the news of the shootings in Baton Rouge. This follows on the Dallas shootings of police and these incidents of police shootings of citizens. And as you and I were talking before we started recording, you worry about the spiral that we're in.

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HEWITT: That's what - I read a column for the Washington Examiner last week that said reversing the spiral. How do you reverse the spiral? LA went through this in 1992 and, in fact, in 1992 there's a similarity. Then-governor Clinton flew to Los Angeles in the aftermath of the riots and I began my television career in the middle of those riots. And President George Herbert Walker Bush did not get there in time and that was a defining moment in the campaign, I thought. The president looked a little out of touch with what was an important issue.

But what LA went through was, they replaced Daryl Gates with Willy Williams and the replaced Willy Williams with Bernie Parks and I knew them both because I was doing nightly television. Then, those two gave way to Bratton and then Bratton gave way to Beck. And each iteration has been more transparent and more collegial and the department has become, over time, more reflective of - and it's a great police department now. People have a lot more confidence in LA cops than they did when they started in LA in 1989 about being fair and equitable towards all members of the community.

That needs to happen in every major police but I don't know how you get it down to the local level. The Minnesota shooting, which was face timed, is inexplicable to me. We don't know what happened. I'm not judging the officer. I don't know what happened. But it's inexplicable to me and that's a smaller department. But the answer is Chief Brown in Dallas.

AXELROD: Dallas, yes.

HEWITT: It's an amazing...

AXELROD: Powerful.

HEWITT: Powerful.

AXELROD: That was one of the most powerful set of remarks that I've ever seen. Him in the wake of those shootings. And so moving. Especially someone who's lost his son, his partner in incidents related to all of this.

HEWITT: Had you heard of him before?

AXELROD: I had not.

HEWITT: Neither had I. So the hero...

AXELROD: I sat there with my mouth agape as he spoke because of the moral authority that he showed.

HEWITT: Did the city of Chicago pick a police chief yet?

[00:33:17]

AXELROD: Yes. Yes.

HEWITT: From within the department?

AXELROD: Yes. An African-American named Eddie Johnson, which I think was the right call, because I

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think you need someone who can talk to the police and talk to the community and be a bridge between them, and I think he has that opportunity. But you know, the thing that worries me in Chicago is that -- this is one place you say, where do I disagree, I don't really -- I don't agree with the President that there's no impact on the psyche of police officers, all of this. It's only human nature to say, you know what, I think I better -- I'm going to back off. And in some cases, they should back off.

But you saw a spike in crime in Baltimore, I think the same has been true in Chicago after some of the terrible incidents last year incidents, they were killings that were captured on tape, by a police officer.

I worry because we have a terrible crime problem in Chicago. The same -- this young man, Laquan McDonald, who was killed by the Chicago police officer, just in the same period of time, there was a young man, nine years old -- not a young man, a kid -- who was lured away from a basketball court by a gang banger who took him into the alley and assassinated him as retribution because the kid's father was a gang banger. The little boy was found in the alley -- I still get verklempt thinking about it, with his basketball a couple of feet away from him.

And I grieve for Laquan McDonald, I grieve for that little boy, and I just worry that we're in a spiral where instead of building relationships between police and community so that together we can deal with these terrible issues of crime, particularly in the inner city, we're driving this chasm that only results in more violence.

[00:35:20] HEWITT: Del Wilber, who's an "L.A. Times" justice reporter, just wrote a book called "A Good Month for Murder" embedded with the Prince George's County homicide squad for two years. In the month of February, 2015, there were 21 murders in Prince George's County. I think 19 of them connected to the importation of drugs from Mexico and abroad, that high volume (ph) heroin stuff that's the new killer.

And the epidemic of violence among the drug related community is wildly beyond imagination. As Leon Wolf at Red State, a conservative writer admitted, anglo middle class, upper middle class, and upper class America has absolutely no idea what living in the high crime areas of the United States.

AXELROD: What's interesting is the drug issue is now sort of leeching into all communities.

HEWITT: Very much. In Ohio, Rob Portman is a friend, and a great senator, and I think one of the best men in the Senate, sponsored the comprehensive addiction recovery act recently, and he told me there are more deaths as a result of drugs in Ohio than car accidents now, which is overdosed. So it's kind of a stunning thing that one would assemble with the French Connection in the 70s, kind of.

AXELROD: Let me ask you, the Libertarians would suggest drug laws themselves have been counter productive and that we should take the money that we're using to prosecute particularly nonviolent offenders who are drug users and we should instead invest in treatment. What do you think about that?

HEWITT: I spent four months in Colorado at Colorado Christian University teach last year for my old friend Bill Armstrong who passed away last week (ph). Great American, great senator. And he was running CC for a few years and he asked me to come in and I taught, and so I saw Colorado up close. I would tell them, go to Colorado, go down to the 16th street mall, see how many -- 7,000 teenagers who are in that city were homeless, and they go there for the dope, and they do petty crime for the dope, and dope is easily available everywhere. It is not an answer, it is a volcano of addiction.

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AXELROD: Let's talk about Donald Trump.

HEWITT: OK. I have my Trump tattoo, should I show you those? I got a couple.

AXELROD: Is it one of those that you put on your arm and you can wash off?

HEWITT: No, no. It's in the back, there.

AXELROD: Or is it actually a permanent one. Because you had him on your show during -- and you asked him some basic questions. The Quds -- the Iranian special forces, he --

HEWITT: He misheard. He heard Kurds.

AXELROD: Did he mishear?

HEWITT: I think he did. I give him that one. Because that happens in radio to me so often -- unless you're looking at someone, you can often mishear. He didn't know the triad on the radio and he didn't know the triad when I asked him in the debate, so that one, I don't give him. But Quds Kurds is something you can go with.

AXELROD: Some confusion about Hezbollah and Hamas --

HEWITT: That he admitted to. He didn't know the difference. That's pretty basic, especially the Israelis kind of notice. That's -- Iran, north --

AXELROD: Exactly. You're a very, very fluent guy in policy. You've been around --

HEWITT: I tricked you, David Axelrod.

AXELROD: Some brilliant, brilliant people in public life. Do these things worry you about Donald Trump?

HEWITT: I wish everyone was more interested in national security than they are. That probably reflects my beginning with Nixon. That's all he thought about, that's all he cared about. He actually signed the endangered species act, which is a terrible law, and I asked him once, why did you sign it? He said, oh, it seemed like a good idea at the time. I wasn't paying attention to that stuff.

You know, the national environmental policy act, the clean air act, he didn't care a lick about domestic policy. He was about China and Russia, and merbs (ph) and --

AXELROD: I by the way appreciated some of those initiatives, but --

HEWITT: I know. And they have a whole wing in the library that nobody visits because it's all the bad laws he signed. So it's --

AXELROD: I should go and up the tenants, at least in those.

HEWITT: You'd be the only guy in the NEPA room, I think you'd be the only guy in the national environmental -- he did more environmental law than any other president, including Roosevelt.

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But no one spends enough time on that. And I don't know if it's your experience that it's the hardest thing to do, and I told Donald when he was last on, Donald Trump was on, I said, your campaign against President Obama ought to be six words. Lead from behind, red line, JVs. That's the six word summary of the presidency. Those are all three national security issues now.

AXELROD: Yes. But he -- as you know, if you're president, you have to get beyond the six words, and you have to --

HEWITT: Yes. Not if you're a candidate, though.

[00:39:57] AXELROD: Exactly. No, it's different. It's obviously different. But it seems pretty important, especially in an unstable world like this.

HEWITT: The Jeffrey Goldberg piece in "The Atlantic" I thought was a very in depth look inside of the decision matrix of a president in this particular world. I think I discussed with you on the air, the worst decision of the Obama presidency will be the failure to extend the status and forces agreement in 2011 because we lost the peace. We can debate that forever, but that's my worldview. But, there are reasons not to have extended it, which have some beyond the control of the United States of America.

AXELROD: Yes. Like the resistance of the Iraqi government to doing --

HEWITT: Maliki turned out to be a dud. Turned out to be a bad guy. And so --

AXELROD: I mean it does -- one of the things that makes it such a vexing situation is, the President said this many times -- you can't -- unless people are willing to find a way on the ground, the parties on the ground politically to coexist, it's very, very difficult, and we saw that. You know, Maliki tried to press his advantage, and he went after the Sunni and the Kurds, and you got what you got.

HEWITT: The other time we went to the oval with W, half dozen again talkers, this was in August 1 of 2007 -- we were late getting in because he was on a teleconference with Maliki. And he got off the conference, I can't quote the President again directly, but something to the order of, a senior government official said, they don't learn quickly over there. How to run parliamentary democracies.

AXELROD: Right. Yes, I mean I think -- one of the questions I have, having been there, and you've been there, and you've studied this for a long period of time, is, what -- how much humility should we have in thinking about what we can actually do in terms of situations like this? The United States military can pacify any area. They could go in right now and -- there's no doubt if we sent enough troops, we could take out the last remnants of ISIL who are sort of being shrunken as we speak. But the question is, then what? In terms of governance. And do you have to stay there in perpetuity because they can't find an accommodation?

HEWITT: I don't want to overstate my experiences. I've never been in the Oval Office when a serious decision was made. I did spend a lot of time with a former president, which is a different kettle. They have perfect hindsight, right, when they're out of office. Everybody knows what they should have done, shouldn't have done. But I will say that Nixon talked a lot about the South Korean peninsula as being an example of how America exerts force abroad.

The rebuilding of Japan, we're still in Okinawa. South Korea, it's been 1950, so 66 years since the -- 65 years since the truce -- it's a long-term commitment.

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AXELROD: But you didn't have -- you didn't have the kinds of forces that one has to contend with in the Middle East, these sort of ancient --

HEWITT: Sunni Shia conflict is by far the most complicated tribal conflict on the planet, and Steven Pressfield is one of my favorite authors, it's all about the tribes. Alexander the Great failed in Afghanistan, and the British failed in Afghanistan, and America hasn't failed there yet but it's a difficult situation.

AXELROD: Going to take another short break and we'll be back with Hugh Hewitt.

(BREAK)

AXELROD: Describe to me, Hugh, what you think Donald Trump's foreign policy is? What's his general orientation towards foreign policy?

HEWITT: Teddy Roosevelt, great white fleet. He's going to build a lot of boats, going to hire up a lot of soldiers, sailors, airmen, and marines, going to put the Ohio class submarine in the water, going to spend big deficits -- his stimulus is going to be a defense package, and then he hopes not to use it. So it's going to be a -- I don't think he correctly characterizes President Reagan's foreign policy, because President Reagan intervened in Grenada. He bombed Gaddafi. George Herbert Walker Bush did Panama. We --

AXELROD: He also withdrew from Lebanon.

HEWITT: He withdrew from Lebanon after the attack. He also armed the Afghan Mujahideen. So he's aggressive, but he wasn't preemptive. He was aggressive, but Grenada was sort of preemptive.

So I think Donald Trump understands himself as a Reagan foreign policy conservative. Maybe Cap Weinberger would be the best analog. Cap Weinberger never used force unless you go in over enthalpal (ph) doctrine -- overwhelming force. Win quickly, get the hell out.

AXELROD: But what about -- he said at one point that he would bomb the hell out of ISIL. What about that what next question? What about the, OK and then what?

[00:44:56]

HEWITT: That will go to who does he bring in for his national security team. Now, I think John Bolton has, for example, one of the most comprehensive understandings of the world and it's very Reaganesque (ph). It's not neo-con; it's very Reaganesque (ph). I think Bolton would have a serious role there. I think John Kyle who you had to have dealt with would be a very steady hand at the Department of Defense. There are people like Tom Cotton who's actually fought in the war who would be advising among (ph) this (ph). So, I think the appropriate use of American force at the what-after question, if you have enough of a timeline and you go to the American people and you persuade them again and again and again that the alternative -- we saw the alternative in Nice, we saw the alternative in Orlando. It's an alternative question, there are no easy solutions.

AXELROD: Yeah, well I mean, talking about Nice, what would a big defense buildup have done to stop the Nice truck -- I don't know what you would call it, but the massacre with a truck -- with a vehicle as a weapon.

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HEWITT: One of the things Secretary Clinton said in this campaign that I agree with is after Nice -- she said we need an intelligence surge. I think she means by that a vastly expanded CIA human intelligence operation, a vastly expanded cooperation with DGI, the French ally (ph) six (ph). And all of this that we actually become a much more cooperative set of agencies. A new book by Daniel Silva, "The Black Widow" is a novel -- one of my favorite novelists -- but it talks about the realities in intelligence. That's one thing you would do.

AXELROD: But the reality of where we are -- and I don't want to belabor this because we got other stuff to talk about here. We're sitting here in Cleveland at the beginning of this convention -- is that there is progress being made versus ISIS in their so-called caliphate. They're being driven back and driven back. And one of the assumptions is the reason that they're striking out or their agents are striking out elsewhere is because they're losing on the ground. So, this is more of an intelligence issue, is it not?

HEWITT: I don't know Raqqa is an (ph) address (ph). The United States Marines and the United States Army working with the Jordanians and the Saudis ought to been in Raqqa a long time ago. And I will never agree on this. The redline decision was a terrible decision.

AXELROD: Yeah.

HEWITT: And it telegraphed to Assad that he was saying. That meant that the civil war was never going to end and that meant we would never go against Raqqa. I expect the next president has to remove Raqqa because it has an address. They have to go to Libya as well. And they are going to Mosul. That's good.

AXELROD: He -- you mentioned Tom Cotton. He was on your pronounced list of potential running mates for Donald Trump. He didn't choose -- I forget who the other...

HEWITT: He (ph) wanted Christie or Trump...

AXELROD: Oh, yeah, Christie. Yes.

HEWITT: Dan Sullivan I thought was a good choice who showed up briefly in some of them because again, he'd fought the war. And if you prosecuted terror or fought terrorists, you were on my short list.

AXELROD: But you ended up with Mike Pence.

HEWITT: Yeah.

AXELROD: But you're enthusiastic about Pence.

HEWITT: Yes. It -- he wasn't my first choice, but I've seen the effect he's had. And I think about down...

(CROSSTALK)

AXELROD: Effect he's had where?

HEWITT: On party regulars -- people like me who are Republican. Rob Portman needs help. Pat Toomey needs help. Kelly Ayotte needs help. Joe Heck could win in Nevada. We got to keep the Congress -- Mike Pence is gonna be out there raising money for Republican seats and telling regular

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Republicans, conservatives from the old Reagan coalition, stick with our party we're still conservative. Donald Trump may be different, but he -- as Mitch McConnell told me, he can't the party. He can change the presidency; he can't change the party. And I think that's important for Pence to...

(CROSSTALK)

AXELROD: Did you watch the announcement of his...

HEWITT: No, I was in the air flying from California...

AXLEROD: You should take a look at that tape because as -- I'm sure you've read the cover...

(CROSSTALK)

HEWITT: I've read the cover.

(CROSSTALK)

AXELROD: But it's very Trumpy (ph).

HEWITT: David, you're the expert, I'm not. Isn't he -- the rules don't meant (ph) -- Tom Brokaw said this on Meet the Press. Gentlemen, we are still using the old rule book. When are we going to learn --

AXELROD: Yes.

HEWITT: -- it doesn't matter if he doesn't talk about Mike Pence.

(CROSSTALK)

AXLEROD: Well the only issue...

HEWITT: ...Oprah.

AXELROD: The only issue -- that's true. The only issue is by marginalizing your running mate on day one, what message does it send? Now maybe conservatives don't care because they've got a guy with his foot in the door.

HEWITT: That's it. I think if -- as Vice President Biden has been to President Obama, so would Vice President Pence be to President Trump, a trusted quiet connector.

AXELROD: But don't you need to see some sign of trust? I mean what is it about -- they have such different views on so many issues.

HEWITT: I know. Mike Pence got elected the head of a Republican Study group, which is this (ph) orthodox conservatism, and then the chairman of the conference, which means he can get along with moderate Republicans and Senator (ph) Lutright (ph) and conservatives. So, he's got people skills and he's got policy chops that don't agree and line up. Free trade, he's a NAFTA guy and Donald Trump is not. So, it'll be an unusual ideological party (ph). But where Biden and Obama disagreed, the president won, right? The president wins.

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AXELROD: Well, there's no doubt about it. But conservatives want the vice president to win in this case?

[00:50:00]

HEWITT: Yes they do. And hopefully -- because I think Donald Trump -- I give him a lot of (ph) credit for when he becomes interested in something, mastering it. That's what developers do. I'm sure you've worked with them in different situations over the years (ph). Developers are project specific. I've represented them for years. They throw themselves into a project. They get it done. They put it away, they move on to the next deal. He will do that. And I have confidence he'll do it well.

AXELROD: Yeah. I mean the problem with the presidency is you've got a thousand projects going on at once. Meaning one of the stunning things about it, when you sit there is you realize presidents from hour to hour are dealing with completely different things.

HEWITT: Yeah, just think of the last 48 hours in your old office.

AXELROD: Right.

HEWITT: Or actually the last 72. We could (ph) go back to Nice and then you go to Turkey, and then you end up in Baton Rouge.

AXELROD: The -- yeah, I know. No, it's a -- and you know I think we've -- the view of the presidency is such -- now, the president's expected to deal with every single thing that happens. You can't escape that. And so you have to be equipped and prepared to deal with it. One more thing on Trump. The Chicago Tribune wrote in this morning's paper, as we sit here today, the -- now, this is a conservative editorial page, the bombastic real estate mogul doesn't have the experience or intellect to be president. He's offered empty and offensive policy proposals, big applause lines on the campaign trail, but alarmingly incoherent as a governing philosophy. You were saying stuff like that earlier in the year.

HEWITT: Judge Curiel upset me a great deal. And I was ready to leave ship. That did not stop.

AXELROD: And here's a quote from you. It's like ignoring stage four cancer; you can't do, you've just to got to attack.

HEWITT: And he didn't ignore it. That's why I was not the only one saying that, but I like to think that that uproar changed the direction of the Trump campaign and made a mark with Mr. Manafort, with the exit of some campaign staff, the addition of others, that you cannot be cavalier with your language with regards to race in the United States. You can't do it. And that message was I think clearly communicated, not just from me but from hundred -- so they treated that, which was an imprecision in language, a disregard for the conventions we've come to talk about race. He's (ph) not a Mexican judge from Indiana; he's an Indiana judge of Mexican ancestry. It's hugely -- I don't think --

(CROSSTALK)

HEWITT: -- Donald Trump is a racist. I don't -- I talked to him 15 times (inaudible). He is indifferent to the language of race in a way that communicators can't be.

AXELROD: Or is he using race as a political device?

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HEWITT: You know, they said about Nixon at '68, and it's probably true. The Southern strategy is probably true, encouraging lawless (ph) law and order. I don't believe that's Donald Trump. I don't -- that would credit him with more of a grand scheme than I think he has. His grand scheme, his make America great, which is a -- he has a tractor beam for the disappointed in the country. That's what I think. I think people are disappointed from all walks of life. They're disappointed with President Obama or they're disappointed with the Republican Party, or they're disappointed with their own lives, and they like Donald Trump.

AXELROD: You mentioned law and order. You know that was -- today, as soon as the news of Baton Rouge hit, he -- and he mentioned this twice in his press conference yesterday. He -- law and order was a phrase he used, we're (ph) the law and order party, I'm the law and order candidate. And today, in response to Baton Rouge, he said we demand law and order. Do you see intimations of the '68 Nixon campaign there?

HEWITT: There are. And I wonder who is actually helping -- if they've tested that. I asked a Trump campaign operative today if they're testing that. Because in '68, it meant a racial connotation.

AXELROD: Yeah.

HEWITT: This time it means I'm with the police. And that is a very powerful message that a lot of people -- I was the cops today over at lunch. And this place has got a million cops, right. Every --

AXELROD: Yes.

HEWITT: -- policeman in Ohio is here.

AXELROD: Yeah.

HEWITT: The State Troopers with their Smokey the Bear hats and all the police are all over. And I was having lunch, and the Baton Rouge shootings were on the TV above three officers behind me. And they kept looking up. And you know I'm with them. I mean I think that we're underestimating the stress, as you mentioned early in the conversation, that they're under and the consequences of this spiral. And I think people have to speak very clearly that it is unacceptable to threaten or front -- I got stopped for speeding going to the Reagan Library for the first debate. And the officer let me off after I played the debate card. I said well I'm rushing, I got to get -- I was going from Stanford down to Simi Valley. And he let me off as (ph) a (ph) chipper. And he said I'll let you go but I want you to ask these candidates...

(LAUGHTER)

HEWITT: I said why? He said ask them when they're going to start supporting the police. So, I gave the Taffer (ph) the question. He brought it up in his question wheel. And he explained...

AXELROD: Now you have a lot (ph) of (ph) time pass you can drive as fast as you want down (ph) there (ph).

HEWITT: But he said he gets fronted every night. And that's when -- it didn't happen even three years ago when all kinds of suspects -- black, white, red, yellow, green -- get in your face as an officer and get in your grill as opposed to compliant respect, which is what we ought teach our kids about police.

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[00:55:02]

AXELROD: Well, and mutual respect. I mean, that's the thing that you talk about in Los Angeles is very, very important because --

HEWITT: Yeah.

AXELROD: -- absolutely you know -- I used to be a police reporter --

HEWITT: Oh yeah...

(CROSSTALK)

AXELROD: -- and I saw all -- I worked nights, so I saw police do heroic things, and occasionally reprehensible things. But in the main, they put themselves in harm's way every night. I was always aware of the fact that they had families and they wanted to get home to their families you know just like everybody else. So I mean I have a high regard for the police.

HEWITT: Have you told the story on your podcast -- I know we're running low on time. But have you told the story on your podcast of the cop that came to tell you about your dad?

AXELROD: Yeah, well that was something that really -- you know people think of police as essentially guys with guns going after other guys with guns, but they have to do a lot of other things.

HEWITT: Right.

AXELROD: One of them is occasionally to have to deliver bad news. And I will never forget the police office in Chicago, his name was Gardner, who came and knocked on my door when I was 19 years old to tell me that my father had committed suicide and that his body had been discovered in New York and that I had to go home. And a few years later, when I was a reporter, I was reporting out a police -- a crime story, and I called up a cop shop, a district and he answered the phone. And he said hey are you the kid that I talked to back a few years ago about your dad? And I said yeah. And he said you know I always wondered how it worked out for you. I'm so glad you're doing well. And it was a touching --

HEWITT: Sure, that's what 10 years later, 15 years later?

AXELROD: -- moving, moving moment. But I -- you know I do worry honestly about -- we need to sort of lower our voices and deescalate what is becoming a really alarming chasm between the community and police. And I'm not sure the law and order riff is going to do that. I think it may be exploitative and helpful with Donald Trump. Basically he's not getting many minority votes right now. One would argue that he could do well to get some in order to win this election. But I think part of being president -- you saw President Obama wrestle with that in Dallas is to try and be a president of everybody in moments like this and speak truths to everyone.

HEWITT: Yeah. The de-escalation of rhetoric unfortunately in this campaign -- and I had said this, this morning on Meet the Press -- the campaign has become disconnected from events in the world and the country. It's about the negative -- I'll test my theory off on you. Just very quickly, we -- all presidents, being human, are deeply flawed. We learn their flaws. Usually the office (ph) shows it. This is the first

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presidential campaign when the flaws of both candidates are well known to the public and being debated -- their choice being debated on flaws not values and policies. It's disconnected and I don't know how you ever reconnect it. And I don't know how those two --

AXELROD: Well, these conventions --

HEWITT: -- stop throwing blows (ph).

AXELROD: -- will be interesting because generally you use your convention to tell your story. And honestly, the most successful conventions are the ones that tell a positive story and deliver a positive message. Bill Clinton remade his image in --

HEWITT: Yep.

AXELROD: -- 1992 --

HEWITT: Yep.

AXELROD: -- at the Democratic Convention. You'll remember George H. W. Bush had a great convention --

HEWITT: Yep.

AXELROD: -- in 1988.

HEWITT: That pilot -- that picture of the plane when he was being rescued. Yeah.

AXELROD: Yeah, I mean it really changed peoples' perceptions of him. I don't know if these candidates can change perceptions. And you know you're talking about in Trump, a guy with 60 percent negatives, Secretary Clinton with 54 percent negatives. Do you think that that guarantees sort of a war of attrition?

HEWITT: Yes. It's the -- I call it the voter misery index. And I add up the negatives of the two candidates. I don't think we've ever been even remotely close to 115. And -- or 120. And so it will be World War I of political campaigns. And in the end, voter suppression -- not technically what people refer to about voter suppression -- but voter exhaustion with this campaign may change the outcome. Brexit tells me I don't trust any poll.

AXELROD: Yeah.

HEWITT: None. Zero.

AXELROD: I actually think the polls -- now, pollsters always -- they cringe when I say this. I think the polls on Brexit actually influenced the outcome because I think that people saw a vote for Brexit as a no-cost vote --

HEWITT: As a safe --

AXELROD: -- because (ph) they (ph) it was going down.

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HEWITT: -- safe vote.

AXELROD: Yeah.

(CROSSTALK)

AXELROD: And you could -- and that could you know in some ways benefit Trump. I think the demographics of the country are operating against Donald Trump in this campaign. And you know I think he's boxed himself in a way that's going to be very hard...

(CROSSTALK)

HEWITT: He has to Michigan, Pennsylvania and Ohio.

AXELROD: Yeah.

HEWITT: That's a trifecta we haven't done since what, 1984?

(CROSSTALK)

AXELROD: Yes. And I don't -- and I think Michigan is very, very difficult. Ohio is close. I think Pennsylvania is like fools gold. It's like Missouri for Democrats. It's like every election it looks like you can win it, and then at the end...

[01:00:03]

HEWITT: Romney went there on the night before the election.

AXELROD: Right.

HEWITT: It was like Charlie Brown and the football.

AXELROD: Right.

HEWITT: Every Republican goes to Pennsylvania.

AXELROD: I think the other piece is Florida and what -- but I think because of the large number of Hispanic voters there --

HEWITT: Yeah.

AXELROD: -- he's at a disadvantage down there. What do you expect from these conventions?

HEWITT: I'm -- I have no expectation because I think we're in uncharted territory. If Hillary Clinton picks Admiral...

(CROSSTALK)

AXELROD: You could've probably been a keynote speaker. You know...

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(CROSSTALK)

AXELROD: You put things up on...

(CROSSTALK)

HEWITT: ...one in (ph) the Trump children. I sent a note in. If you want me to interview one of the Trump children, I'll be happy to do that. But if she picks the Admiral, the former ambassador to NATO, I think the election may be lost because he's the most trustworthy -- the accidental Admiral. You probably know him. I just read his book. He's got such integrity and such thorough-going charm that her negatives would be offset in a pretty powerful way. If she picks Senator Kaine or Governor Vilsack, it'll -- Iowa is actually in play, which I didn't expect. And Missouri will be in play. Trump can win. Trump can win. I don't think it's...

(CROSSTALK)

AXELROD: What do you rate the odds?

HEWITT: Hillary's a two to one favor. How's that? Yes.

AXELROD: You -- we should give you -- you've been pretty tough on her. You feel like she has compromised herself on this e-mail issue from a security standpoint.

HEWITT: Yeah, the -- I call it the server issue. I've never cared about the foundation. I don't give a lick about that because they do good work in Haiti. And he traveled with President George W. Bush doing a lot of stuff. And so...

AXELROD: And in Africa.

HEWITT: Yeah, there may be shady occasional deals, but I care about the fact that your deputy director of the CIA, Mike Morell, told me on the air that it was a certainty that hostile intelligence agencies had access to her server. That means in real time it was compromised. That means they have a book on her that they can read. And I'm sure you had those briefings. You had SCI clearance like I did at the old days at DOJ where they know everything about you and they have sort of (ph) -- I took David Axelrod, and you gave me five years of all of your electronic communications, not only those that you sent but those that you received. Imagine the leverage I would have on you.

AXELROD: Hugh, we were recording Angela Merkel's cell phone...

HEWITT: Yeah.

AXELROD: Don't you believe in this world in which we live that everybody knows everything about everybody?

HEWITT: No, I think we're better than the rest of the world. And...

(CROSSTALK)

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AXELROD: No, but my point is this. I suspect that they would have rich intelligence on her and anyone else who is a leader of the, you know, enemies of the country and friends of the country. So, I just think it's the world in which we live. So I mean just -- I don't accept your...

HEWITT: Your (inaudible). Yeah.

AXELROD: And -- but I will say this. You -- I have admired the grace with which you have navigated your way through these rocky shoals of Republican politics these last few months.

(CROSSTALK)

AXELROD: It's only -- and all I can tell you, it's only four months to go. So, you may make it.

HEWITT: Thank you. It was great fun talking with you, David Axelrod.

AXELROD: Thanks, Hugh. Hugh Hewitt, great guy and a great guest.

HEWITT: And you will ask the president for that interview for me.

AXELROD: I'm going to do it.

HEWITT: OK, David, thank you.

AXELROD: I'm gonna do it.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

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