

Senator John McCain on Axe Files – April 1, 2017

David Axelrod: If there is an iconic figure in American politics today, it's John McCain. His career has spanned four decades. His history as a prisoner of war in North Vietnam well known and his role as a crusty maverick in the United States Senate well established. I have a chance to sit down with Senator McCain the other day in Washington for a conversation that also aired on the Axe Files on CNN.

Senator, thank you for having us. I don't know if your people mentioned this to you, but I was not, I was on the other side in 2008. I was for the other guy.

John McCain: I think I recall.

David Axelrod: So it's generous of you to have us, to have me here today, but-

John McCain: I recall that and could I say that I was honored to speak to your institute as well which is a wonderful organization.

David Axelrod: I appreciate it. The Institute of Politics at the University of Chicago, we're going to talk about that because institutions are important right now. But I want to tell you one thing about that campaign back in 2008. The guy I worked for, Senator Obama, when he was considering running said, and I've written about this so this is not just for your benefit, said, "I think I can win the nomination. I just don't know if I can beat John McCain." And the reason he said that was because he watched you in the Senate, he had watched your campaign in 2000. He knew you were willing to take on silliness in both parties and he admired you for it.

One thing that stood out to me in that campaign, one moment that spoke to that quality of yours was a moment in Minnesota that you'll remember well late in the campaign when you, it was a town hall meeting, and you confronted a number of people or they confronted you with their fears about Obama and you were very, very firm. And you said, "I have to tell you, Senator Obama is a decent person and a person you don't have to be scared of as President of the United States." A woman said she didn't trust him, thought he was an alien. You said, "No, ma'am, he's a decent family man and citizen that I just happen to have disagreements with on fundamental issues and that's what this campaign's all about." Seems like that moment was more than just a flash in the pan but a harbinger of things to come. And we've seen it boil over in 2016, what's going on in our politics and what were you thinking at that moment when all of that happened?

John McCain: Well, first of all, when that happened and the woman made the statement, I knew Barack Obama. I had worked with him in the Senate. In fact, Ted Kennedy,

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had been sort of our, the guru for both of us. And I knew he was an honest and decent man. And so it wasn't, it wasn't a planned response. It was just as a town hall meeting environment that I responded. And as I also said, I have fundamental disagreements with Barack Obama. But this business of destroying people's reputation and integrity, David, honestly, it's not good for America.

Let me just give you an example right now, we are talking about, for this United States Supreme Court, about 60 votes being required because that's the rules of the Senate. Now we're talking about breaking those rules. Now, Harry Reid when he was the Democratic leader broke those rules, but I was involved 15, 20 years ago in joining together with Democrats to stop that, because that's what makes the Senate unique. And so the situation today, as I see it, frankly, there's no group of Democrats that I could sit down with.

David Axelrod: Right. No. You mentioned Ted Kennedy before and I know that you worked closely with Democrats for some time. When you came to the Congress, you had already known and worked with a lot of Democrats because you had been the liaison from the Navy. But what was it? You were booed in that room that right by your own supporters for what you said. And you're running mate spoke very, she spoke powerfully to that constituency, and I don't want to malign them. I'm trying to understand and I'm wondering if you understand, what is driving all of that? What is driving the anger? What is driving the sense of disenchantment out there?

John McCain: Part of is that we have not recovered from the meltdown of 2008. My own state-

David Axelrod: Got hit hard.

John McCain: Got hit very hard because of the importance of housing. You've got these blue collar, white, middle aged workers, good, honest citizens who never did anything wrong in their lives that have now found themselves with no economic future. And those were the people that were missed by the pollsters by we all know in the last election. So I believe economics had a great deal to do with it. I also think that media, honestly, I mean, let's be frank. There's certain levels of media that are extreme right, extreme left, that you just have different versions of the occurrence of the day. And I think that that has a polarizing effect. But I would say more than anything else, it is the disappointment that so many Americans, the auto-worker that now watches an automobile to put together by a robot rather than an individual. It's so-

David Axelrod: Well, you mentioned, you mentioned the robots. President Trump ran very much on an anti-trade platform. But it feels like, in today's times, the real danger for the middle class and for the middle class worker comes not from Mexico or China so much as robots and computers.

John McCain: Which they portray and believe is because of foreign competition. You're right. It has been technology that has caused these jobs to disappear a lot more than trade has. But I, if I could mention that issue, I've always been very friendly with Hillary Clinton. I've admired her. We've had a very good relationship. We've traveled together. When Hillary Clinton abandoned the TPP, that, in my view, was very harmful for the future because that basically gave the economy of Asia over to China. And in case you missed it, in the last couple of days, New Zealand has now made a trade deal with China. China will be going around filling in the vacancy that was created by this American, America-firsters. And honesty, to anybody without studies history knows the lessons of the [inaudible 00:07:34] TERA facts. I mean-

David Axelrod: Back in the thirties.

John McCain: Back in the thirties which led to protectionism, which led, over time, to it was not the only factor but it was a major factor in a global economic collapse.

David Axelrod: But it strikes me, Senator, that you're fighting an uphill battle on that today.

John McCain: Yep.

David Axelrod: Hillary Clinton changed her position because she sensed the politics were not with her on that.

John McCain: Exactly. I understand that.

David Axelrod: Donald Trump ran that. He rode that tide. So-

John McCain: No, I understand that, but Hillary had also stood strong for a long time in favor of it. So when she switched, but you're right. Quote America first. What was the name given to Charles Lindbergh, Henry Ford, there's several other names that spring to mind that were the guess what? American Firsters.

David Axelrod: The pro-fascist.

John McCain: Exactly.

David Axelrod: Contention in the 1930s.

John McCain: Exactly.

David Axelrod: Yeah. You know, you raised that.

John McCain: Isolationists.

David Axelrod: You were, I was sitting in a stand for CNN watching the inaugural ceremonies. So I didn't see you or your face when the president spoke but he spoke about

America first. And I was thinking, "Your slogan was country first." Those things mean something entirely different, don't they?

John McCain: Yes. They do. Country first means do what you can to help your country and our fellow, your fellow countrymen. America first means whatever you do, America has got to be first in all things. And the difference between isolationism frankly and internationalism is just those one word, country, America.

David Axelrod: And which side is winning right now?

John McCain: I think that the isolationists are probably still winning, but I also think that some of the realities are becoming apparent. For example, in my state, the Finance Minister of Mexico told me that Mexico does more business with Arizona than it does with Spain. If you cut off that trade across border between Arizona and Senora, Mexico, I'm telling you, you would have just serious and deep recession. There's a couple of hundred thousand jobs that are directly, not indirectly, directly related to our trade with Mexico. And by the way, if we continue with this poisoning of the environment between the United States and Mexico, they're going to elect a far-left president and you think we got problems with Mexico now?

David Axelrod: They have an election next year.

John McCain: Exactly.

David Axelrod: Have you communicated this to the president? Have you had discussions with the president about this?

John McCain: No, but-

David Axelrod: Have you tried to have discussions with the president about it?

John McCain: No, but I have talked with the people around him. His national security team is the strongest I've seen.

David Axelrod: You could have appointed that-

John McCain: Absolutely, I would have been honored to have had those-

David Axelrod: General Mattis, McMaster-

John McCain: McMaster-

David Axelrod: Kelly.

John McCain: Kelly. Dan Coates who we all admire and respect as Director of National Intelligence. And I do talk, and Ryan [Suprebus 00:10:54] who was my chairman

in 2008 in Wisconsin. I have conversations with them all the time. The vice president, I have conversations with all the time as well. I just have not, I had two phone calls with the president and they were relatively brief.

David Axelrod: Just getting back to this issue of the climate. When I, I'm old enough to remember young John McCain coming to the Senate. I was a young reporter at the time and you were sort of the face of the new conservatism. You were the Reagan, the Reagan Republican, sort of the prime example of that. And you were very close to President Reagan. Talk to me about him and what he represented, because everyone tries to expropriate him now. You hear politicians saying, "I'm a Reagan Republican," or, "I'm the Reagan tradition." What is the Reagan tradition as you see it as someone who knew him well?

John McCain: The president was very good to me. He and Nancy were both very, had a great sentimental streak and when the prisoners of war came back and he was governor of California, it was amazing, the way their hearts went out to us. And so therefore I spent more time over at the White House than the average freshman Congressman and Senator. Ronald Reagan was the most inclusive of any conservative that I've ever known. Who was his pal that he used to have drinks with? Tip O'Neill, the liberal Democrat. So they had built a relationship. He would spend a lot of time with Democrats both Senators and Congressmen. He's the one that said if a quote, "If a fella is with me 80% of time, then I'm with him."

When Social Security was about to go bankrupt, that relationship with Tip O'Neill paid off. They both walked out into the rose garden and said, "We're going to save Social Security." And they had tough medicine, that only both of them together could have administered. Was Ronald Reagan partisan? Was he a proud Republican? Was he a conservation of the, in my view, of the most legitimate, that I've ever known. But he understand the necessity of us working together. Now, I think it's important to note that Obamacare just collapsed. Why did it collapse? Because it was-

David Axelrod: You mean the Republican attempt to repeal and replace?

John McCain: Yeah to repeal and replace it. But back in 2008, the Democrats rammed it through. And so now in 2017, we want to ram it through on a partisan basis. There has been no entitlement ever enacted that wasn't done in a bi-partisan basis and that's what Ronald Reagan did. He stood for what he believed in but he also believed in relationships and we've got to not, I probably shouldn't waste your time with this, but one time, O'Neill was with, speaking to the Democrat Caucus. Remember that Democrats were in the majority the first couple years. And this one young Democrat stood up and said, "Why are you always going over and having drink with Reagan? Why are you going over there with that?" And Tip O'Neill said, "Because I like him." You know, they liked each other.

David Axelrod: Yeah. Can we get that back?

John McCain: Well, you know, Ted was one of the last of those, Ted Kennedy, because it was Bob Dole that said that Ted Kennedy could eviscerate on the floor in his speech and then come in the cloak room and convince you that he wasn't talking about you. But you know the thing about Ted Kennedy? The reason why-

David Axelrod: You guys once menaced each other in the well of the Senate.

John McCain: Oh, we fought and we would fight and we would and then we would finish the fight and we would put our arm around each other, I'd never forget, he'd say, "Yeah, we did pretty good, didn't we?" I mean he was, because he divorced personal relationships and personality from the issues. So therefore, if you were friends with Ted Kennedy, that friendship worked. And it also like with Reagan and O'Neill, when you had an issue, you could sit down and work it out because you had a personal relationship.

David Axelrod: Let me talk to you about your own life. I was looking at a one dollar bill the other day and I said, "That guy looks awfully familiar to me, that George Washington." Then I found out you're a second cousin so many times removed from George Washington. Your entire family, every generation, has served in the military. Your father and your grandfather were both four star admirals. That's an incredible legacy. It's also something of a burden, is it not? I mean, when you were a kid-

John McCain: Oh, yeah. [crosstalk 00:15:52]

David Axelrod: All the moving around, all the, and the burden of just carrying that legacy forward.

John McCain: Yeah. So typically of me, even to this day, I rebelled. So when I went to the naval academy, I tried to break every rule that was in existence.

David Axelrod: And they rewarded you by putting you right at the bottom of the class.

John McCain: The bottom of the class, [inaudible 00:16:11] I didn't break every rule at the naval academy but there's very few that I missed and I always came very close. I'd get up to the maximum number of demerits and then I'd behave for a while until the next cycle. But I loved the naval academy, the friends I made were-

David Axelrod: You wrote that you knew you belonged there and you dreaded going.

John McCain: Yeah. And I resented that I had been, ever since I'd been that high, "He's going to the naval academy." And that carried over into my early days as a devil may care Navy pilot, but I made friends. It was a wonderful life. Some of the happiest times of my life is being in a squadron with 12 airplanes and 16 pilots and the

togetherness and the comradery and that's the same kind of thing that developed with my fellow POWs.

David Axelrod: Do you think that, do you think that part of what's happened here in the Congress is that you don't have people who've served together in war? We had the greatest generation, the Bob Doles of the world and others, who had served together. Was there nothing that sort of brings people together in the way that did?

John McCain: You know, David, that is absolutely true because I saw that particularly with Dole and [inaudible 00:17:29]. There was a bond there, both of them ended up terribly wounded in the same hospital-

David Axelrod: Yes. And in with former Senator [crosstalk 00:17:39] from Hawaii, Hawaii Storm.

John McCain: Lost his arm and there was something unspoken there between them. So I do think that that mattered some. But by the way, we do have now a generation of Senators and House Members who were veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan and that's good for the institution.

David Axelrod: We're going to take a short break and we'll be right back with Senator John McCain.

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David Axelrod: You wrote, you said something beautiful in your speech in 2008 when you accepted the nomination of your experience as a prisoner of war which has been well, which is well known, but, "I fell in love with my country when I was a prisoner in someone else's. I loved it not just for the many comforts of life here. I loved it for its decency, for its faith in the wisdom, justice, and goodness of its beautiful." It's a beautiful sentiment and I think some people would say, "My God, you spent six years being tortured in solitary confinement, physically abused in every potential way, and this is the lesson that you drew from it." Why did you come out of that with this extraordinary sense of what America is?

John McCain: Well, as you just quoted, being deprived of it is obviously one of the factors. But also the bonds that were forced amongst us even though I was in solitary confinement for three years was communicating with each other, keeping each other's spirits up, do resisting. Don't break and don't make a confession like they were trying to get us to, it made us appreciate one love of country, love of our

fellow prisoners, and frankly, it was the time of my life that I, that gave me a certain quality that I don't think I would have ever required and that is to recognize that if you do the right thing, it's going to be all right. And by the way, I haven't always done the right thing. But when I forgot that lesson, I've always paid a price for it. But I've tried to remember that. And I'm the most, I feel that I'm the most fortunate person you will ever know. When you think of the planes the crashed, when you think of the fire onboard [inaudible 00:20:40] one day when my airplane was hit by a missile, 134 brave young sailors died that after, sunny afternoon in the Tonkin Gulf. And then the ship shoot down and all that. I mean, I've been so fortunate my whole life.

David Axelrod: How did that experience inform your kind of world view, inform the way you look at the world today?

John McCain: I really believe that that it means that America has to lead, David. I really believe that more than anything. The 20th century was the American century. The early part to, the early part of it, the two most horrendous wars in history, when you look at encompassing wars took place. And then America came along and led in a new world order which is now being under enormous strain.

David Axelrod: You also, clearly, believe that America on human rights needs to take a leadership role, even if it means intervention overseas.

John McCain: You know it's a careful balance but we are the exceptional nation. We are the shining city on a hill. I do travel a great deal and still the admiration for America and they want to be like us. They want, one of the fundamentals of the United States of America is our belief in human rights. That's why we, that's how we were founded to people right to determine their own future and sometimes maybe I'm too committed to it. Maybe I get too emotional. But when I'm in, in Mariupol with the President of Ukraine and a woman is there and he pins a medal on her, her son had just been killed the day before by a Russian sniper. And tears flowed down her face. I guilty, guilty, I get emotional and I don't like Vladimir Putin.

David Axelrod: Would you, would you be so fervent about it had you not had the experiences that you had?

John McCain: No. No. I never [crosstalk 00:22:39].

David Axelrod: You said something else about your captivity. You said, "The thing I missed most was information. Free, uncensored, undistorted, abundant information." That seems to be under-

John McCain: Attack.

David Axelrod: Assault today, too. You kind of referenced it earlier. How big is a concern is that of yours?

John McCain: Huge concern. I think it's one of the major challenges that this information, this some story is somewhere, and then gets into the legitimate media. Stories that are just, look at some of the stories, there was a 60 Minutes piece just Sunday night. One of them was about a guy who just put out all this stuff. Hillary Clinton is dying of you know, just trash. And all of a sudden, it gets picked up and to the point where a guy believes that there's human trafficking going on in a pizza place in Washington, D.C., and he goes in and fires shots. Really.

David Axelrod: Do you ... Obviously, this is mixed in now with a story about Vladimir Putin. Now, I want to ask you about a friend of yours Boris Nemtsov who was killed. Tell me, just tell me who he was.

John McCain: Boris Nemtsov was in the Yeltsin presidency. He was a Prime Minister. He was one of the key individuals. And then of course when Putin took over, he was basically the leader of the opposition. And he continued to work in Russia and in the opposition and he was working on an expose of the corruption in the Putin regime. And he was in my office and I met him on several occasions. And I said to him, I said, "Boris, I don't think you should go back." Twice, I told him, "I don't think you should back." He said, "I have to go back to my country." It was like a month later that he was murdered in the shadow of the Kremlin. He was a lovely man and he knew that he was going right into the teeth of danger. And since then, of course, the killings go on by Vladimir Putin with very little response.

David Axelrod: Fair to say you despise Putin and you've made that very clear. What did you think when you saw the president with Bill O'Reilly when O'Reilly called Putin a thug and a murderer and the president said, "Well, you think we're so innocent."

John McCain: Killer. What O'Reilly said, it stands out in my memory, he said, "He is a killer." And the president said, "Well aren't we killers, too?" That was so appalling to me to have a moral equivalency between this fellow who is, I don't know how many deaths he's responsible for. For example, in Chechnya, where he put down any opposition with great killing.

David Axelrod: There were several assassinations just last week.

John McCain: Yeah. One guy was thrown out of a fourth story window. So to state that there's some moral equivalency between an imperfect nation, that's the United States of America, and Vladimir Putin is appalling.

David Axelrod: President, some of his supporters, even he himself, likes to derogate the whole Reagan legacy to him. Do you see him as a Reagan, a Reagan-like figure?

John McCain: No. I don't. And I think it's pretty clear that there's a difference between, "Well aren't we killers?" And the guy that stood there and said, "Mr. Gorbachev, take down this wall." He spoke out for the captive nations. He spoke out for the

people that were behind the iron curtain and after the iron curtain, there were thousands who said, "I heard Ronald Reagan. I listened to the voice of American. I listened to radio for a year. He gave us hope." That's pretty big difference.

David Axelrod: It's been, it's not clear, everyone seems to agree that the Russians did interfere in our election campaign. You said this morning, I think, "It's an act of destruction that is certainly more lethal than dropping some bombs."

John McCain: Because if you destroy democracy, the fundamental of democracy, there's certain fundamentals, rule of law, respect, etc. but one of them is freedom to elect legitimately leadership. That's a fundamental principle and if you destroy that, then you've really destroyed democracy. So it's one thing to destroy a building with a bomb or inflict damage but if you destroy the fundamental of a free and open society which is what democracy's all about, you inflict incredibly heavier damage.

David Axelrod: And the Russians are doing that not just here but elsewhere.

John McCain: In France, they're playing right now heavily and they're also going to play in Germany. They tried to over throw the government of this beautiful little country called Montenegro in a coup. And the pressures they're putting on the Baltic countries are intense.

David Axelrod: So if someone, if an American citizen were complicit with the Russians in trying to interfere in our elections, would that in your view be tantamount to treason?

John McCain: I think you would have to gauge exactly the circumstances. There's one thing to have a conversation. It's another thing to plot together. But I think it would be, it would be something that that individual will have to be held accountable.

David Axelrod: And obviously you know what I'm referring to because you have ongoing investigations here. Do you have confidence in the Congress to be able to investigate this in an open and clear way with integrity?

John McCain: Well, I think it's pretty obvious that the Chairman of the House Intelligence Committee has to described what happened and why and who.

David Axelrod: We should [crosstalk 00:28:48]-

John McCain: That led him to the conclusion-

David Axelrod: Chairmen Nunes with [crosstalk 00:28:50]. I was thinking about that when that story broke. He went down to the White House on his own, gave the president. And I'm thinking, "What number on the Richter scale would John McCain have hit if, as ranking member of a committee, his chairman had done that?"

John McCain: And especially without involving the other party. One of the reasons why, on the Armed Services Committee, we produce a bill that's signed by the President of the United States every year is because we work in a bi-partisan fashion. It's always overwhelming majorities that we pass the legislation out of committee. You've got to work together and I'm happy to say that, if from what I can tell, Senator Burr and Senator Warner are working together in the Senate Intelligence Committee.

David Axelrod: We're going to take another break and we'll be back with Senator McCain.

Do you, you mentioned earlier the sort of bifurcation of the administration. You have all people, those people who you have confidence in the national security realm. You've got Steven Bannon who is sitting at the elbow of the president who has a wholly different role about the role of America in the world, much more akin to the speech that you heard, the inaugural speech. Who's making the decision here? Who has the president's ear on these issues?

John McCain: I don't know because I know that the president has great respect for these former military people that he has given the most important national security posts. But on the other hand, I also know that everybody tells me that Mr. Bannon has his ear constantly. So there is a contradiction within this administration. I know that both General Mattis and General McMaster has a worldview of the role of the United States that is very different than what's been articulated by Mr. Bannon.

David Axelrod: You just got back from overseas. You're traveling constantly and I'm sure you're in contact constantly with people from overseas. How do you describe American foreign policy right now?

John McCain: What I try to tell them and I've been to two conferences in the last two weeks, one in Munich and one in Brussels, is that I have the greatest respect for the team on national security that the president has assembled. And I believe-

David Axelrod: What about for the president?

John McCain: Well, then I also do say, "But I'm not sure who the president listens to." But the president has committed to rebuilding the military. And frankly the last eight years have been an unmitigated disaster as far as national security is concerned. Look at the world.

David Axelrod: Part of that is because of the sequester, right?

John McCain: Yes and that was a act of Congress rather than the President of the United States. But withdrawal from Iraq, withdrawal from Afghanistan, rules of engagement, there's many other things that were done by the 30 somethings and the National Security Council that I find just unacceptable.

David Axelrod: You've worked on some major pieces of legislation in your time. One was the immigration reform. And another was cap and trade to deal with the issue of climate change. Why did you take those issues on?

John McCain: I just thought that they needed to be addressed and that they were very important. That's why Ted Kennedy and I sat down together with six others to try to, with others to try to do immigration reform. And then there was the gang of eight where I tried to do it again. I believe that we have to have a true and legitimate immigration reform because we're never going to have 11 million who are in this country illegally without some hard, tough path to citizenship. But we also have to have borders that can be enforced and are enforced. Right now there's a flood of manufactured Mexican heroin that's coming into the United States of America that's killing a whole lot of people.

David Axelrod: So what's going to happen with immigration? What do you think of the steps the president's taken? I mean you come from a state with a large Hispanic population.

John McCain: I think sooner or later we're going to have to address it and I don't know what this president's going to do and I don't know what his priorities are. But if he said we have to quote build a wall, which I take in the most figurative sense, not literally. Build a wall but at the same time, do immigration reform. E-verify where you have to have documentation that proves you're in the country legally where we enforce the border where we let STEM students, science, technology, engineering, mathematics students stay in this country, where you provide people a long, hard path to citizenship. Those kinds of things could all be put together in a package and I would hope the president would consider it.

David Axelrod: You know there was a piece the other day about the precipitous drop in the number of foreign students who are applying to American universities which struck me as a real blow to our country, not to other countries. What's the impact of that long-term for the country?

John McCain: You've been to Silicon Valley, you see that a significant number of those who are on the cutting edge of the world's technology were not born in the United States of American. I mean it's just a fact. There's thousands of Chinese students who are studying here in the best schools in America, why not give them an opportunity to remain here if they have an engineer degree? That's at that end. At the other end is that there is farm labor that American citizens will not do and we need guest workers. And we could work out a program where people can come and work in the kind of farm labor that is so difficult and return to Mexico or wherever it is, or, well, return to Mexico after they finish that work. We need to do that.

David Axelrod: As we sit here, the president's announced today steps on climate to roll back much of what the Obama administration has done. What's your level of concern having worked on this issue before?

John McCain: I thought that the measures that were enacted, first of all, by regulation is wrong. The president decided, at least in the last couple of years, if not more, to rule by edict. He said, "I've got a pen and I've got a phone." And that was really telling. And a flood of regulations came out. Rolling back some of those regulations has had a positive effect on the stock market. But on the issue of climate change, I think it's happening and I've been to Svalbard which is up in the Arctic Circle and seen the melting of the ice up there. But I also think that we should use nuclear power a lot more. And some of my environmental friends are absolutely opposed to that.

Again, it's this polarization that has been so harmful. And could I just point out, in my own state, some of the regulations were just foolish. They had a Waters of the US regulation for Arizona. In Arizona, we have so little water, the trees chase the dogs. But they put in a Waters of the US regulation which effected a farmer who had a mud puddle in his yard.

David Axelrod: Would you pull out the agreement the president made, President Obama made, the Paris Agreement on Climate Change?

John McCain: I don't think I would. I think I would certainly review it to see if there's excessive areas and all that but I would not announce a pull-out. I don't think there's any doubt that a climate change is taking place.

David Axelrod: Senator, listening to you, I know that you care deeply about institutions and the institutions of our democracy. And we've talked a little bit about what's happened with attitudes toward the media, we've talked about our global relationships and so on. There seems to be an assault on institutions. You mentioned the Institution of Politics that I run at the University of Chicago to try and encourage young people to become part of it. But there's a powerful sort of counter assault on institutions. You're an institutionalist. You believe in them.

John McCain: I believe in them. I was on with Chuck Todd the other morning with Sunday Morning and we were talking about this and I said, "Look, I hate you. I hate Meet the Press, but the fact is-

David Axelrod: You've been on it quite a bit.

John McCain: "Without a legitimately, respected media in this country, then you have destroyed the real important part, it's not an accident that it's one part of our Bill of Rights because you have to have a media to watch what governments do. And you can appoint all the judges and all that but it's the media that informs the American people." And now with this false media and these, I'm really really very concerned about Americans receiving legitimately, unbiased, objective views on the issues.

David Axelrod: Do you, listening to you, there's so much that you are sort of in one place and the president presumably and his supporters are in another place, do you feel like you're part of the Trump Republican party?

John McCain: I do because again the people around him and I have had long relationships with, I work closely with General Mattis, the Secretary of Defense, General McMaster, the National Security Advisor. I've worked very closely with them and I will continue to do that. And he was elected President of the United States. It's my job to do what I can to get along with the president but at the same time, I cannot betray my principles and my values and the things that I believe in. So it is a careful line to walk, but I am more worried about this country than I've been in my entire lifetime. We are seeing strains on the world order. We are seeing China. We are seeing six million refugees, 400,000 killed. The list goes on and on and you know the world, a world in incorrigible turmoil. It's my job to do what I can to work with the President of the United States.

David Axelrod: And do you feel you can move him?

John McCain: I feel that his advisors can. I know that he has great respect for those that he appointed as his national security team. So I do believe he listens to them.

David Axelrod: You started this conversation by talking about people you'd work with in the past. Talk to me about someone I know you work close to Mo Udall.

John McCain: Oh, yeah.

David Axelrod: Who was a liberal icon in the House and you guys were as thick as thieves.

John McCain: He was the most entertaining guy I have ever known.

David Axelrod: He's the guy who said, by the way, I know you'll like this. He said the, "The difference between catcuses and caucuses is that on catctuses, the pricks are on the outside."

John McCain: And that was after he was defeated when he was running for a leadership position in the House of Representatives and they had this young Turk say, "We're all killed by the old bulls." He also said, by the way, when he came out just before that, he said, "I'd like to thank the 120 guys that committed to me and the 60 who voted for me." He was a very funny man and a lovely man and he took me [inaudible 00:40:54], we traveled together, we spent time together. He was just, he was everything that I wanted to be and frankly I've not been. I've not lived up to his standard because he was good and kind and generous to everyone.

David Axelrod: He was tragically ill at the end of his life with Parkinson's Disease. I heard that you regularly visited with him toward the end of his life. You'd go over and read the Arizona papers to him.

John McCain: Yeah. I'd bring the clips and read them to him and he just was so lovely and so good to me and he was kind of, in many ways, a role model to me because of his unfailing good humor and pleasantry. But he was very effective, too, by the way, as chairman of the Interior Committee in the House. He was a very effective member of Congress.

David Axelrod: Do you miss that? Do you miss the Congress that you came into?

John McCain: Yes.

David Axelrod: Do you miss the Senate that you came into?

John McCain: Yes. I do. Yes. I miss Bob Dole who, one time, when we were doing the Cassava Resolution was given the final speech and he said, "And I've been supported in this by Senator McCain who for five years wore a bracelet with his name on it." He had never told me. I said, "Bob," afterwards, I was watching him on the floor of the Senate, I said, "Bob, why didn't you tell me you wore a bracelet with my name on it?" He said, "Ah, I didn't figure it mattered that much." It was a classic. Bob Dole, I loved Bob Dole. I loved Howard Baker. I've had the great honor of seeing some real giants on both sides that are really one of the great opportunities that I've had is meeting significantly great leaders on both sides of the aisle.

David Axelrod: Do you see them, I mean, this is a kind of loaded question, but do you see them today?

John McCain: I see a new generation of both members on both sides that I see great talent there. I really do. I see some, I especially and favorably am inclined towards those who are veterans, that have been to Iraq and Afghanistan, both men and women. Joni Ernst from Iowa, she spent time in Iraq. So, yeah, I see talent coming up. I have great faith in our system of government over time. There's been strains before.

David Axelrod: Your grandfather came home from the war and there was a welcoming home party for him and he collapsed-

John McCain: And died.

David Axelrod: And he died.

John McCain: Yep.

David Axelrod: And from what I've read, part of it was, he didn't quite know what to do.

John McCain: I know. He didn't know what to do. That was part of it and also the strain. One of the things that he, he was also one of these sentimental people. When his pilots didn't come back, he was commander of all the carriers, and when his

pilots didn't come back, it was pretty emotional for him, too. There was a pretty good strain on those leaders because it was a 24/7, filled with tension combat experience.

David Axelrod: I ask that in part because I know your mother's 105.

John McCain: 105.

David Axelrod: So I figured you got maybe four more terms here.

John McCain: I don't think so.

David Axelrod: But can you imagine yourself not being here? I mean will you know what to do if you're not in service?

John McCain: One, I don't know what I will do. But two, David, in all honesty, I don't want to go out on the downside. I want to go out on the upside. I don't, I've seen some people here who stayed too long and you have to.

David Axelrod: Senator, I so appreciate your time and even though we may have different notions on some issues, I appreciate your commitment and great dedication to this country.

John McCain: Well, can I just say in return, you've continued in many ways to serve and the institute that you have fostered, I guarantee you will pay a lot of dividends in the future because I had the opportunity of meeting a group of those young people and they're very talented.

David Axelrod: Before we go Senator, I'd love to see some of the photographs in your office that are meaningful to you.

John McCain: It would be my pleasure, David, and despite the fact that you beat me, I will forgive you some day.

David Axelrod: I appreciate it. And I'm looking forward to that day.

John McCain: Thanks.

Come on it. This is, excuse the debris, but this is the peace signing on the Missouri when my grandfather, with his head down, the guy in the front row kind of with his head, that's my grandfather. This is my father who was Commander and Chief in the Pacific and every Christmas, when I was in prison, he would fly to Vietnam, go up to the DMZ, and have Christmas dinner with the Marines. The reason why I love that picture, and I know you'll appreciate this, every one of those kids was draftees, you know? They were draftees, they weren't volunteers.

David Axelrod: You didn't talk to your dad. I mean, he couldn't write you.

John McCain: No, no, no.

David Axelrod: He couldn't and I know that you were offered the ability to leave and you didn't because of him.

John McCain: Yes. Indeed. Now this is this lake in Hanoi that I parachuted into. This is the only statue I got. It says UCAF which is an insult because I was in the Navy. In Vietnamese, it says, on 26, October, 1960, some of the people shot down and captured the famous air pirate. It says, "Air pirate, Major John McCain." So this one is interesting.

David Axelrod: Wait, wait, before you do that, let me ask you something, you then led the movement to normalize relations with Vietnam?

John McCain: Yep. Normalize relations.

David Axelrod: Why did you do that?

John McCain: It was healing. Healing, healing. People forget the treatment that Vietnam veterans got when they came home-

David Axelrod: I remember.

John McCain: Is still a national disgrace, and I thought that it would heal the wounds if we had normal relations. I can't tell you the number of Vietnam veterans that I know that said, "I went back to South Vietnam where I was. I went back to Cameron." It was really healing. This statue is next to the lake that I parachuted into, okay? Now this telegram, real quick. When there was, you remember about 10 or 15 years ago there was this conspiracy thing, we left POWs behind, and there was cover-ups and all this. And you know it was a scam, people making money.

So they appointed a Select Committee, me and John Kerry, and one of the allegations of these people who were making the money was if we declassified documents, that would reveal the plot, the reason why. Well, so we put in a bill declassifying any document no matter how highly classified if it had anything to do with POW/MIAs. So this is from Averell Harriman, okay? And it's secret, okay? And it's from Paris, okay? And it says here, at the t-break, [inaudible 00:48:16], you remember he was a negotiator, mentioned the DRV had intended to release Admiral McCain's son as one of the three pilots freed recently but he had refused. That was the first, I told them I had refused, but that was the first corroboration of-

David Axelrod: Because you didn't want to be used for propaganda purposes?

John McCain: No. No. More importantly, [inaudible 00:48:40] had been there three years before I got there.

David Axelrod: And it was first-in, first-out.

John McCain: First-out, yeah. Yeah. And I knew why they were going to release me. Now I got to show you one more picture here real quick. About four years ago, the Vietnamese Defense Minister came into my office and gave me this copy that I didn't, this picture that I didn't know existed. That's me being pulled from that lake, being pulled from that lake where you saw the statue next to. Fascinating. And I did not know that existing.

David Axelrod: Now what all was broken? Which limbs were broken?

John McCain: This arm and this, both arms and then when they hit me with a rifle butt, once they pulled me out, you can imagine they weren't happy, it broke my shoulder and also I broke my knee [crosstalk 00:49:35].

David Axelrod: So you probably didn't need the picture to remember the pain, huh?

John McCain: No. You're kind of in shock but I remember me pulling me out and I remember the folks not being very happy. We just finished bombing the place and of course, everybody disliked Richard Nixon, but I like Richard Nixon because he bombed Hanoi in order to get us out.

David Axelrod: POWs generally were-

John McCain: Yeah, yeah, yeah, because he did do the bombing, the B52 bombing and it's, he's one of the tragic figures in American history as you know. Anyway, and that was the day we left also, you can see that I was-

David Axelrod: You actually look pretty good there.

John McCain: Yeah. They had, the last, last year and a half about, they changed the treatment dramatically and put us in big rooms and with a lot of other people and improved the food and all that. We never quite understood that, but-

David Axelrod: Someone told me that most of the others who were released went for meals and drinks and you asked for newspapers.

John McCain: Yeah. I was so and I'd read and read. My eyes would hurt and I'd fall asleep and I'd wake up and read and read. And then the Navy was kind enough to send me to the National War College which was really a great year so I could really catch-up on everything.

David Axelrod: And then you came here?

John McCain: As the liaison officer, and you know the two guys who I became very good friends with was-

David Axelrod: Terry Hart and Bill Cohen.

John McCain: Exactly.

David Axelrod: They were in your wedding.

John McCain: Exactly.

David Axelrod: A Democrat and a Republican.

John McCain: There you go. And Terry was one of the really intellectual-

David Axelrod: I'm a, he's a great friend of mine. I think it was a great loss to the country.

John McCain: It was.

David Axelrod: When he couldn't continue his career.

John McCain: I think under certain circumstances, he might have been President of the United States.

David Axelrod: Oh, I think he was on a trajectory to win that election. No. It was a tragic story. I talk to him from time to time.

John McCain: I do, too. I do, too. He's in Denver and he still writes and he's very thoughtful.

David Axelrod: I think he's one of the smartest guys I've ever met.

John McCain: He and Cohen were believed on the Armed Services Committee to be the real intellectuals. And they hung around a lot together.

David Axelrod: Yeah. I covered his race in 2000, sorry, 1984, and it was really interesting, because he had thought the thing through, and one of the parts of his strategy was, he was going to go down south and talk about military reform. And here was a guy who ran Georgia McGovern's campaign 12 years earlier, but he had this expertise and Sam Nunn was a supporter of his and he was a very, very interesting politician.

John McCain: Speaking of Sam Nunn, I saw him the other day with the introduction of was it Mattis? I've forgotten. He was there at the introduction of-

David Axelrod: Oh, yes, at one of the hearings [crosstalk 00:52:28]. It might have been Tillerson.

John McCain: Tillerson, that's right. It was Tillerson. Yeah. It was Tillerson, yeah. Sam's still probably one of the premier national security guys I've ever known.

David Axelrod: Yeah. It's interesting to hear you talk about these people because they are very much Democrats and Republican.

John McCain: Yeah, well, one of the great things about the Armed Services Committee, as you know, is we got this tradition that was established a long time ago. And we stick to it. Small item trivia. Jack Reed, a West Point graduate, Naval Academy, first time they ever had the chairman and ranking members as service academy graduates.

David Axelrod: You got to know Hillary pretty well on that committee.

John McCain: Yes, very well. Very well. We traveled together. We went to Svalbard together. We did a lot of stuff together. I really enjoy her company. I really do.

David Axelrod: And you have a high regard for her?

John McCain: Oh, sure. Absolutely I have a high regard for her.

David Axelrod: Do you think she was treated fairly in the election?

John McCain: I don't know. I think that the Wikileaks thing was the most unusual thing I've observed, as you know. But I also, David, whenever you lose, I know this very, very well, you find out all the mistakes you made. When you win, you didn't make any mistakes.

David Axelrod: Right, no, I always say you never look as smart as, you're never as smart as you look when you win and you're never as dumb as you look when you lose.

John McCain: Yeah. For example, she came to Arizona twice and didn't go to Michigan. Now if she had won, who cares? But because she lost.

David Axelrod: Right. And I think there's a lot of serendipity on the other side, too, that passes as genius now.

John McCain: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah.

David Axelrod: It's the nature of the business.

John McCain: Yep. It is, as what is it? Burman says, "That's why they play the game."

David Axelrod: Exactly.

John McCain: Glad to see you [crosstalk 00:54:19].

Speaker 2:

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