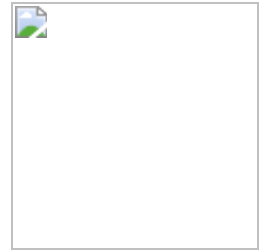




# The Axe Files with David Axelrod

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Ep. 550 — Susan Rice



Speakers

Intro, David Axelrod, Susan Rice, Outro

**Intro**

00:00:05

And now from the Institute of Politics at the University of Chicago and CNN Audio, The Axe Files with your host, David Axelrod.

**David Axelrod**

00:00:16

I last spoke with Susan Rice on this podcast six years ago when she published her memoir about her extraordinary life and career in service, including her stint as U.N. ambassador and as national security adviser to President Barack Obama. But then she returned to public life in 2021 in an entirely new role as President Biden's domestic policy adviser during his very eventful first years in office. When we sat down this week, I was curious about that big transition and the observations she gleaned in working with Biden on some of his greatest domestic priorities. Here's that conversation. Susan Rice, my old friend. It's it's great to see you.

**Susan Rice**

00:00:59

It's really good to see you, David. It's been too long.

**David Axelrod**

00:01:01

You've got the glow of a person who's been out of government for a few months. I can always recognize it. You don't have that, that sort of haggard, sleepless look that I come to associate with my friends in the White House.

**Susan Rice**

00:01:16

I've had a nice summer.

**David Axelrod**

00:01:18

That's great. So let me let me ask you, because it was, it was interesting to me. I mean, my whole exposure to you was because of your foreign policy expertise and all of your history in government was in in that. And then you decided to take this job. First of all, why why did you. You went into the Biden administration not in a in a national security role, but in a domestic policy role. And I think a lot of people said, well, that's interesting, that's sort of out of type. What caused you to to decide to do that?

**Susan Rice**

00:01:58

Well, in the first instance, I knew that if I could, I wanted to serve again with President Biden. I'd worked with him, as you know, for eight years while we served President Obama. And I'd actually known President Biden for many years before when he was in the Senate. And I thought it was a critical time both to advance our priorities and our agenda, but also to try to undo so much of the damage of the Trump administration. And when the president asked me to serve in the domestic policy role, I actually was excited about it. And it goes back, frankly, David, to my upbringing and my childhood, actually, long before I got into foreign policy and national security, which really happened after graduate school, growing up here in Washington, D.C., with parents who were very much involved in education policy issues, equity issues, economic policy issues. I actually knew I always had a desire to serve. I thought for the longest time that it would be on the domestic side. And then when I had the opportunity at age 28, the very beginning of the Clinton administration, to serve in government, I had two job offers, actually.

00:03:12

**David Axelrod**

Yeah, one in the National Economic Council.

00:03:14

**Susan Rice**

One in the National Economic Council for Bob Rubin and the other on the National Security Council for Tony Lake. And I wrestled with that decision.

00:03:22

**David Axelrod**

High class problems.

00:03:22

**Susan Rice**

It was a very high class problem. And I kind of did it eeny, meeny, miny, moe. And honestly, as I wrote in my memoir, "Tough Love," I, I made the calculation really based on ignorance that it might be harder to transition from domestic policy to foreign policy than the other way around. And since I had the opportunity to start in foreign policy, I decided that's what I would do. And then one thing led to another and 25 years of work. So having the opportunity to come back under President Biden and do domestic policy was exciting to me. Steep learning curve, new issues, but many of the same skills and experiences that I had developed over many years, particularly as national security adviser, I was confident I could apply to the work of domestic policy.

00:04:08

**David Axelrod**

You guys have accomplished a lot. And I'm not saying that, this is not a partisan point, but just as an objective matter, a lot was done in the in the time that you were there. And I want to get to all of that. But, you know, we're sitting in Washington right now, and I understand a little about the sort of pathology of this town and. You know, national security, everybody knows who the national security adviser is. That's not generally been the case for the domestic policy. So in this weird, perverse town, and I could say that because I don't live here, you do. You can defend it if you want. It's always sort of like, what do you do? And how you're measured is, well, how many people report to you? What meetings are you in? What, was it an adjustment to you for you to come in in a role that is important, especially with a president who cares about domestic policy, but not is not as visible and with not as big an empire as you commanded when you were the national security adviser?

00:05:10

**Susan Rice**

It's an interesting question. I guess it was an adjustment in some ways, but but not in others. You know, the amount of public profile I had was something that I was perfectly able to determine. So, you know, if I had wanted to be out in TV, you know, almost every day, I could have been out on TV every day. I thought my comparative advantage and the way that I could best contribute was to bring these skills that I'd learned on the national security side to driving the bureaucracy and the agencies to outcomes that serve people. And that's that's not a, you can. There's certainly value in being out. And I was. When I thought it was appropriate, I'd be on TV or do interviews or whatever. But we were, we were really focused on what could we get done through legislation, through executive action that would tangibly improve people's lives. What was an adjustment, though, was, you know, at the National Security Council I did have a staff of at one point as many as 400 people. And I had about a 10th of that at the Domestic Policy Council. And then I had to be very thoughtful about, you know, how do you cover so much territory? I was responsible as domestic policy adviser for health care, for veterans, for racial equity, for criminal justice, for gun policy, for education, agriculture.

00:06:32

**David Axelrod**

And you took a piece of immigration, as well.

00:06:32

**Susan Rice**

A large piece of immigration.

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**David Axelrod**

Which we should talk about.

00:06:35

**Susan Rice**

All the. All these various pieces. And then how do I be effective with a much smaller team? And that was an interesting challenge and one that I think I managed to figure out how to work with. But that was an adjustment. You know, if you're working on Africa at the National Security Council, an office I once ran in the Clinton administration, you know, I had three or four or five people, depending on, you know, what was going on, able to support just our work on sub-Saharan Africa. You know, my whole education team was two full time people.

00:07:11

**David Axelrod**

Yeah.

00:07:12

**Susan Rice**

So that gives you a sense of the the differences.

00:07:14

**David Axelrod**

Yeah. As a manager, how did you handle that, and how did they handle you handling it?

00:07:21

**Susan Rice**

It was interesting. First of all, the other challenge was, you know, having spent 25 years in national security, I knew the people and the players. If I had to remake a National Security Council staff, I would have known exactly who to tap. I didn't have that same experience and advantage coming in as domestic policy adviser, so I had to learn the people. And I had to trust people whose judgment.

00:07:45

**David Axelrod**

Had to be proven to you.

00:07:45

**Susan Rice**

To build a team. And I built a first class team that I'm super proud of. Really smart, really committed people who were experts and from whom I learned. I mean, I, I didn't pretend coming in to know everything. I couldn't possibly. Some of these issues are highly technical, the health care issues, the immigration issues in particular. So the challenge was to find the best people who I could learn from and who I could rely on and trust and empower them. And that's what I did.

00:08:16

**David Axelrod**

How much was the early work that you did consumed by the pandemic, which was sort of enveloping the whole country at the time? People forget what it was like when you guys took office, not just, you know, all of the reverberations from the insurrection, but the country was very much steeped in a really, really bad time relative to this that I think we still haven't actually emotionally recovered from completely. But how much did that absorb you at the beginning?

00:08:49

**Susan Rice**

Well, it's interesting. I mean, first of all, it affected all of us because, David, you and I worked together in the White House. You know what a bustling place that is. And when we started on January.

00:08:59

**David Axelrod**

With very narrow corridors.

00:09:00

**Susan Rice**

Exactly. When we started on January 20th, that afternoon after inauguration and for several months thereafter, there were very few people in that complex because of Covid. You know, the senior West Wing staff was there, and the skeletal staff for all of us were in the old Executive Office building, and most of the people were working remotely. It wasn't until the summer of 2021 when most White House staff were able to come back and work full time on campus. And so that was strange and it affected, you know, how you hire people, how you build a team.

00:09:39

**David Axelrod**

Especially for you when you're trying to build a team.

00:09:40

**Susan Rice**

When you don't actually know everybody already. But we managed. And it's fascinating to me how much you can accomplish over Zoom, but I think there's no substitute. This experience taught me the real value of in-person work. You really need to be able to walk down the hall and open a door and say to your colleague, How do we solve this problem? But to answer your question about the pandemic, you know, we had a whole team led by Jeff Zients, who is now the chief of staff, who ran, you know, all of our Covid policy and Covid response. But then there were pieces of it that were very much relevant to the work of the Policy Council. So, for example, for us, at the Domestic Policy Council, the whole challenge of how do we reopen our schools and make up for learning loss, that was very much a focus of ours.

00:10:31

**David Axelrod**

Well, let me ask you about that, actually, because this is a lingering sort of issue as to whether the president should be more aggressive about calling for school reopenings. And, you know, there were deep concerns from the teachers unions and so on about that, concern about the safety of their teachers. But in the full blush of history, which, you know, we can look back on it now. Did that happen fast enough, do you think? And you guys must have batted these issues around, the trade offs between time lost in the classroom and, you know, the risk of further spread?

**Susan Rice**

00:11:08

Remember, I mean, it wasn't that long ago, but people, I think, forget. President Biden came into office in January of 2021. Pandemic had been going on almost a year, and kids were out of school. He came back in and said very clearly, we've got to get our kids back in school and we got to do it safely for them and for their families and for the teachers. And so in March, we, after a ton of work, we got the American Rescue Plan enacted by Congress. \$122 billion of that rescue plan was for education and for helping, you know, ensure that schools had the testing, the masks, the ventilation, as well as the support for students, you know, mental health support, tutoring that they needed. And so that enabled schools to reopen during that semester of the first, you know, first half of 2021. We reopened the schools. The president was very adamant that we had to do so and do so quickly, but safely. And, you know, there will always be some who will want to score political points on one side or another of that very difficult issue. But it was the president who actually did reopen the schools.

**David Axelrod**

00:12:21

But leaving the political points aside, this has been sort of a flarepoint with parents, you know, especially now. You know, you still hear the concerns because of what we now know, which is that people lost.

**Susan Rice**

00:12:35

Learning loss is real.

**David Axelrod**

00:12:36

Yeah.

**Susan Rice**

00:12:36

And it's it's sustained. And, you know, I think the best one could do as we came into office was to try to give states and localities the tools and the resources and the encouragement to reopen as quickly as they safely possibly could. And that's what they did. But we now are grappling with, and we will, I believe, for many years, the loss of learning in that year, two years of of the pandemic. And, you know, that's going to be a long term challenge.

**David Axelrod**

00:13:09

Yeah, I want to, just related to the pandemic, something interested me about your biography. Your dad was in the Tuskegee Airmen, and that's a proud tradition. But there's also there are lingering issues related to it, not not the least of which is that it was a segregated unit, but about medical experimentation and so on. And there was resistance in various communities, but in the African-American community. And part of what was said was we've had bad experiences in the past. And I was wondering, given the history that you know personally, how big of a problem was that? Because this vaccine resistance continues to this day.

**Susan Rice**

00:13:53

Well, that's a really interesting question. First of all, there, beside the Tuskegee experiments, there were so many instances in our history where African-Americans and other minority groups were used by elements of the government, essentially as guinea pigs for various medical and eugenics-type experimentation. So there is a historical, the skepticism, to put it mildly, of the government in medicine as it relates to people of color, particularly African-Americans. Yet, you know, it was African-Americans and Latinos and Native Americans who were dying in the greatest numbers from Covid. And it was absolutely essential that those groups get access to and and knowledge of the value of vaccines. And, you know, the team that I mentioned that Jeff Zients led as Covid coordinator really prioritized vaccine equity and ensuring that not only it was available in communities, you know, rural and urban, tribal, that needed it most, but that there was an education campaign to explain this is for your benefit. And remarkably, David, it worked. The vaccine uptake in the African-American community when we came in was well behind the white community. It met and then exceeded it. And same for Native Americans.

**David Axelrod**

00:15:26

Part of that probably has to do with the fact that skepticism in some segments of the white.

**Susan Rice**

00:15:33

White community went up.

**David Axelrod**

00:15:33

Yeah.

**Susan Rice**

00:15:34

Yeah. So so but but you know some.

00:15:37

**David Axelrod** What do we do about that, by the way?

00:15:38

**Susan Rice** About the.

00:15:41

**David Axelrod** The politicization of vaccines.

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**Susan Rice** I mean, I don't know what to do. When you see somebody like Ron DeSantis have his you know, his state attorney general advise people not to get a booster. That's just insanity. And.

00:15:56

**David Axelrod** I think it's the surgeon general.

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**Susan Rice** Well the same.

00:15:58

**David Axelrod** Yeah, but authorities that, under his command.

00:16:01

**Susan Rice** Right. Tellingn Floridians not to get a booster when, you know, all of the evidence is to the contrary. So, you know.

00:16:07

**David Axelrod** I think Iowa can't come fast enough for for some of those folks in Florida.

00:16:12

**Susan Rice** I don't know if it's going to make a difference.

00:16:13

**David Axelrod** It's all going to be, it's all, seems to be in service of a point he's trying to make in his campaign.

00:16:18

**Susan Rice** Yeah, but it's a point, I think he's going to continue. I don't think Ron DeSantis, when, as I anticipate he will, you know, doesn't win the primary, is going to be, you know, any more responsible about things like vaccines.

00:16:30

**David Axelrod** Yeah. One of the dismaying things to me is the degree to which everything is sort of fitted into this sort of cultural political divide in ways that make it hard to solve real life problems affecting people. What are the things that you worked on that you look back on with the greatest satisfaction?

00:16:51

**Susan Rice** Well, thank you for asking that. I mean, the truth is that there are a number of things. And as you point out, we we actually were able to get a great deal done in just the first couple of years of this administration. Historic legislation. We talked about the American Rescue Plan, which really helped buoy the economy and saved critical industries, for example, the childcare sector, which was going under and which on which the entire economy depends. It's, parents can't go to work if their kids don't have a place to go. That's an example of the value of of the American Rescue Plan. The Inflation Reduction Act had not only critical provisions related to trying to combat climate change and promote, you know, tax credits to incentivize clean energy, but it also had historic provisions in health care that we worked very hard to achieve. And it's in health care and one of the areas where I am really most proud of what we were able to do. You know, vastly increased the number of Americans who had health insurance and received that health insurance at much lower costs. The Inflation Reduction Act also enabled us for the first time to start to get a grip on prescription drug costs, which, as you know, in the United States, are many times higher than they are anywhere else in the developed world. And it's it's exploitative and ridiculous. So the Inflation Reduction Act capped the cost of insulin at \$35 a month for, you know, the millions of Americans who rely on insulin. And not only now do they apply to Medicare recipients, which is what the legislation did, what the president did through using the bully pulpit is demand, in effect, that the main suppliers of insulin cap it at \$35 a month, not just for people on Medicare, but everybody who uses insulin, because there's no reason. It costs about \$10 a vial to make. They were charging people hundreds of dollars a month in some instances. So it's just ridiculous. So not only is it in effect for Medicare, it's in effect for now for everybody. You know, cap the prescription drug out-of-pocket expenses that Americans will have to pay to no more than \$2,000 a year. And then, of course, Medicare is now negotiating down the price of prescription drugs, which is a huge benefit. So that is something that I'm very, very proud of.

**David Axelrod** 00:19:26  
We're going to take a short break and we'll be right back with more of The Axe Files. And now, back to the show. If you ask people today, and this is a problem in many different areas, but if you ask them about their health care costs, they'd say generally they're going up. And so, you know, and this is true of a lot of the president's domestic agenda, real accomplishments, historic in some cases, the infrastructure bill, climate investments.

**Susan Rice** 00:20:06  
ChIPS Act.

**David Axelrod** 00:20:06  
Yeah, all of that, some of them done, despite my earlier lamentations, on a on a bipartisan basis. But people don't feel it. They haven't seen it yet in their lives. They go to the supermarket and they watch the cash register. And it seems like things are much more expensive. That they go to the gas pump. I'm sure people might listen to us talk and say, well, that's a bunch of bull. I don't feel like I'm paying less. How do you penetrate that, do you think?

**Susan Rice** 00:20:41  
David, I should ask you that. You're the political specialist.

**David Axelrod** 00:20:44  
Oh yeah, that's right, I forgot. Yeah. No, I think it's I think it's an issue because.

**Susan Rice** 00:20:47  
It is an issue.

**David Axelrod** 00:20:47  
Because if you claim more than people are willing to, than people feel, then it looks like you're out of touch or you're not telling the truth.

**Susan Rice** 00:20:54  
Well, we are telling the truth. And the fact is.

**David Axelrod** 00:20:55  
I know you are, I'm not suggesting otherwise.

**Susan Rice** 00:20:57  
I know. But we do need to. There's two pieces to this. At least. You tell me.

**David Axelrod** 00:21:03  
Let's see what kind of political strategist you are.

**Susan Rice** 00:21:05  
There's two pieces. There's the facts as I just laid them out, you know, which are important for people to know. And we've got to do, you know, a better job of of figuring out how to communicate that in a way that that people hear. And then there's the the countervailing realities and sometimes perceptions of realities that people feel. It's one thing to say, you know, that your prescription drug prices might be starting to come down for some things. Doesn't mean that when you go to the grocery store you haven't been paying more for eggs. You know both can be true. And the reality is, you know, inflation has been a challenge. It's thankfully, knock on wood coming down and hopefully will stay down. But it's going to be a while before that is the new normal that people perceive to be reality. But at the same time, as you know, we have historically low unemployment. We have historically high wage growth. So.

**David Axelrod** 00:22:01  
I think, you know, the interesting things, like.

**Susan Rice** 00:22:04  
You tell me what we're supposed to do. We collectively, since neither of us are still serving.

**David Axelrod** 00:22:09  
Yeah. No, no. Look, I think that we faced the same challenge in the first years of the Obama administration going into his reelection, because things were objectively improving, but people didn't really feel it. And we were very careful about essentially acknowledging their their feelings and sort of talking about the nature of the battles that we fought. If I were President Biden, I'd really emphasize, you know, there are reasons why prescription drugs, it's been such a stubborn problem, prescription prices. And a lot of it has to do with the power of the pharmaceutical industry.

**Susan Rice** 00:22:50  
And the fact that they had a sweetheart deal from Congress.

00:22:52

**David Axelrod**

And he was able to overcome that, which, you know, I think reflects strength. But so, you know, I think it's not just a matter of. I think you do less well asking for a report card than you do reporting on the ongoing struggle to make this economy work better for everyday people, acknowledging that there's a lot of work to be done and these are signposts along the way, but they're also reflective of values, and, you know. So I think, you know, they they probably need to, I'm sure they are thinking through how to solve this conundrum, because the easiest thing in the world is to exploit what people are feeling. And that's what, you know, the president's opponents are doing. One more thing on health care, because it's sort of a, everybody who listen to this podcast knows this, but I know that you also are very interested in the mental mental health. And it's a huge concern of mine. Tell me what specifically what progress you made. I know you were deeply involved in the in the standing up of the 98 system, so if people. crisis intervention.

00:24:11

**Susan Rice**

Well, look, David, I. I'm glad you raised this because this is something that that I think is so important and I care deeply about. And I think it's.

00:24:20

**David Axelrod**

Let me let me interrupt you and just ask you, do you do you care deeply about it? Have you had personal experiences that lead you? I mean, I have and I'm very frank about it. I mean, I lost my dad to suicide. So this is a very important.

00:24:34

**Susan Rice**

Thankfully, not anything to that degree. But, you know, there is certainly a history in my extended family of of severe depression in not not my own experience, but, you know, ones that I've seen. And then I'm the mother of kids. And I see, you know, they're now in their early, mid-twenties. And I just see how pervasive the challenge is for our young people. 40% of our, you know, teenagers have are dealing with, you know, profound depression or anxiety. It's something that's increasingly afflicting young Black youth, which, and the suicide rate for young Black people has gone way up. I mean, so there's nowhere you can turn. And by the way, the proportion of adults is roughly now the same, too. There's nowhere you can turn where this is not a problem. And so when I was, you know, working on domestic policy, whether it was, you know, how do, you know, how do we ensure that we have a robust workforce? How do we deal with the challenges we're facing in education? How do we deal with the challenges we're facing with homelessness? I could go through almost every issue.

00:25:53

**David Axelrod**

All of them are touched by mental health.

00:25:54

**Susan Rice**

Exactly. So it's what I call for a force multiplier issue. You know, to the extent we can invest in tackling mental health challenges, it will have redound to the benefit of so many of our other challenges. Now, what do we what did we do? Well, I led the effort to craft, and now we're implementing the first ever comprehensive strategy to deal with our mental health challenges, ensuring that we're investing more in having enough providers, training people. Because one of the big problems is when you need help, you can't get it. Yes, not everybody can be a psychiatrist. And, you know, and we need a workforce that also looks like the people that they're treating. Can't just be, you know, 60 plus year old white men.

00:26:37

**David Axelrod**

Yeah. Not that that's a bad thing.

00:26:40

**Susan Rice**

Some of my best friends. But in all seriousness, you know, you need people with different degrees of skill and training. So, you know, social workers, peer counselors, as well as, you know, PhDs and MDs. So building the cadre of people, making mental health care more accessible, you got to be able to get it, you know, without, you know, going to a top university hospital. You need be able to get it in your community, in your public library, in your school. And then working on prevention, trying to tackle. And that's part of what 988 is, suicide and crisis prevention. But it's also tackling things like social media, which are poisoning our minds of our children. And so we had the first ever.

00:27:24

**David Axelrod**

Well, when you were talking about depression among your kids, I worry about that a lot. I worry about my own grandkids and, who are very much plugged into popular culture. And and they're too young, you know, at this juncture. But I can absolutely see them sliding into the, you know, the point in their lives where they're going to be online and seeing what other people are saying and doing. And, you know, I think, there have been many studies. So we know that there's a relationship between the pressures that are put on our kids, on social media. I mean, it's a.

00:28:03

**Susan Rice**

It's a real thing. And, you know, the surgeon general has done a great job of drawing attention to this. The Department of Health and Human Services now has, for the first time ever, a center to study the effects of social media on young people and to try to devise strategies for countering. And then we got to go after the social media companies. We need legislation finally to pass to protect our kids.

00:28:25

**David Axelrod**

I really wanted to talk about that, because it's a national crisis and it should be a national priority. But so what you guys have done is well appreciated. Let me ask you about two other really stubborn and challenging issues that you worked on and that I know you care deeply about. The first is guns. You know, you talk about young Black men and the level of depression. I think often about these children who live near me in Chicago on the south side of Chicago.

00:28:53

**Susan Rice**

Growing up in complete war zones all day long, every day.

00:28:56

**David Axelrod**

Yeah. My dad, my dad grew up in the post revolutionary Eastern Europe in what is now part of Ukraine, and he spent the first ten years of his life experiencing violence, people being killed, his own home was blown up. I think he carried PTSD til the day that he died. But I think about all these young kids and what this must do to their young brains. And I know there have been studies on this. Guns, you know, I appreciate that they mean different things to different people in the country. And there are traditions that people hold. But it's a, you know, it's a deadly, deadly problem in a lot of our communities. And you're limited by what the Congress is willing to do. You guys passed the first gun law in a long, long time done on a bipartisan basis. But it was a small step forward. It wasn't. It was a meaningful step, but a small step. So talk to me about guns and what you're, not just what you were able to do, but your frustrations.

00:29:55

**Susan Rice**

Yeah, well, I'm it's a really important topic. And also, I want to say, you know, I know how hard losing a parent is and losing a parent to suicide and, I admire your determination to talk about it and to.

00:30:12

**David Axelrod**

Well, mental health is a it's a it's part of the human condition. And the reason we don't deal with these issues is because they're stigmatized and we don't talk about them. My father was a great man and and all of us are subject to depression. All of us are subject to these pressures. So we have to, we have to flush them into the open and provide the opportunities for people to go and get the help that they need. But anyway.

00:30:42

**Susan Rice**

Absolutely. Let's talk about guns.

00:30:44

**David Axelrod**

On the gun issue, yeah.

00:30:45

**Susan Rice**

First of all, this, too, is sort of an issue that I come at first and foremost from the vantage point of being a parent of, you know, I sent my kids to school every day in what I thought was, you know, a safe place and a safe community. And yet, you know, you can't help but worry what could happen to them in school. And, you know.

00:31:07

**David Axelrod**

Or to an from.



00:31:07

**Susan Rice**

Yeah. And my kids grew up in a, just living, just walk, being in a playground. My kids grew up at a time when, you know, Parkland and all these things were happening as they were basically the same ages as the kids that were killed. And so we have got to get a grip on gun violence in this country. It's every day here in the Washington, D.C., my hometown. You know, the problem is getting worse. And there are there there now, you know, now almost generations of young people who will have that incessant trauma of living in an environment where the violence never stops. So to me, it's personal, but it's also, you know, to me, one of the most important policy issues we face. And it is exceedingly frustrating that when, you know, vast majorities of Americans of all political parties, as you know, 70, 80% of people believe there should be universal background checks. 70, 80% of people of all political persuasions think we ought to have, you know, so-called red flag laws and safe storage requirements, red flag laws, so that people who are having, you know, posing a risk to themselves or others can be petitioned, and a court can decide to take a weapon away temporarily. There's so many of the common sense gun policy reforms are widely embraced by large majorities. And yet, Congress won't pass them. The Republicans in Congress won't pass them. The president's been extremely vocal about how we need to reinstate the assault weapons ban, which when we had it for a period of ten years, violent gun related crime went down dramatically and came right back up when the assault weapons ban expired. So we. There is no substitute for legislation on this. The Bipartisan Support for Communities Act, which you mentioned, which passed last summer, 2022, was the first gun violence prevention legislation of any meaningful nature in 30 years. And it it will, as you said, it was a small step forward. What the president has done through executive action is basically the maximum legally allowable to go after ghost guns, which are these unmarked, unserialized guns that you can buy on the Internet and kits.

00:33:44

**David Axelrod**

You can.

00:33:46

**Susan Rice**

Yeah. To go after and ensure that we are requiring background checks to the greatest extent possible. But we can do more. And that's what a new rule that the Justice Department has just put out will do to make background checks as broadly required as can be. But we still need legislation, because there's a gap between what you can accomplish with legislative action and what can be done through legislation. We got to ban assault weapons. You know, there's just so many aspects of this.

00:34:14

**David Axelrod**

That's probably. You know, look, I feel strongly about it because those are the weapons of choice of the street gangs. Every one of them has now semiautomatic handguns. And these are gang, a former gang member told me in Chicago, on this podcast, that, you know, it's considered unmanly if you don't have a weapon that doesn't, you know, shoot 30 rounds.

00:34:39

**Susan Rice**

Gee whiz.

00:34:39

**David Axelrod**

Or more. But. But we're not going to get an assault weapons ban it feels like. That's in terms of polling, that's actually down the list of things that people are willing to support. I find that odd, but and disturbing. But it's the reality. These other things, as you point out, are huge political winners. But. Now, did you have conversations with members of Congress about this?

00:35:10

**Susan Rice**

Tons.

00:35:11

**David Axelrod**

And what was the response? I mean, they must have been candid in private about what the political pressures were of.

00:35:19

**Susan Rice**

Well, I mean, first of all, for Democrats, there was a time, I think even back when we were serving together in the Obama administration, where there were some in the Democratic Party who were reluctant to be outspoken on guns, gun safety issues. I think that's changed. I am hard pressed now to think of a single Democrat who wouldn't vote for background checks or red flag laws or safe storage laws or any number of other things.

00:35:46

**David Axelrod**

Partly because there are fewer rural Democrats.

**Susan Rice**

00:35:48

There are fewer, but not none. There are not none. And and I think the same, you know, is true of most, if not all, Democratic senators. And so the problem, really, because many of these things did pass the House when the Democrats had a majority, it's the Senate and the filibuster rule. And we continue to be bedeviled by that on on this and so many other issues.

00:36:16

**David Axelrod**

I know you'd like to slip out of here without me dragging you back into your role as a foreign policy expert. And I want to get to it. But one last thing, because it is a sort of a nexus between the two. You know, in the city of Chicago and other cities around the country, the immigration issue is really hitting home, partly because the governor of Texas keeps sending migrants into the cities to the point where there's no place for these folks to go. Tell me about dealing with that issue, because that is clearly going to be an issue that people are going to be considering in this election. And it's been a problem that's bedeviled us for a long, long time. And it continues to.

00:36:57

**Susan Rice**

In my experience working on domestic policy and national security policy, the immigration issue is one of the toughest and most intractable issues I've dealt with, and there are many reasons for that. You know, the migration immigration challenge is a global phenomenon, as you know. And it's a big, big problem in our hemisphere. But we are receiving people at our southern border who've come from as far away as India and China and parts of of Europe, as well as Africa, the Middle East, and, of course, from Latin America. Europe is facing a similar challenge. So it's global in nature. It is driven by factors that, you know, nobody can flip a switch and fix quickly. Hunger, climate change, conflict, economic insecurity. And our laws were written for a period that has long since expired. And we need to fix this problem in the United States in a meaningful way on a long term basis. We absolutely need dramatic reform of our immigration laws and policies. We have a system here that is broken. We inherited a broken system, parts of which were made worse by the prior administration, parts of which have been a challenge for many, many years prior to that. Our asylum processing is backlogged and slow. We don't have enough immigration judges. We don't have enough asylum officers. We need to have a combination, in my view, David, of credible enforcement, as well as meaningful legal pathways for people to come here.

00:38:43

**David Axelrod**

I mean, this is important because, you know, when you think about the comprehensive immigration bills that have passed at least one House or the other of Congress, they've all been predicated on the same notion that they have all of these elements, including enhanced enforcement. You've been quoted as talking about the need to have rules that are enforced and observed. And from a political standpoint, I think that that is important. But we seem farther away from being able to do that. I mean, I think the bill that passed the Senate in 2013 had 68 votes or something. I can't imagine that it would today.

00:39:28

**Susan Rice**

No, no. And there's just so many aspects of this that are, you know, horrible. We have all of our DACA recipients, people, young people who came to this country not of their own volition, who are hardworking, educated, contributing to our society. They can't get permanent status here. Farm workers are. We need farm workers to keep our economy going. These are not jobs that are, that Americans, for the most part, are fulfilling in sufficient numbers. We don't have a system that enables us to.

00:40:00

**David Axelrod**

Let me ask you. So given all this what you're saying, given all of what you're saying, what is the short term prognosis here? I mean, what can people expect? Do you think there'll be significant change in the short run?

00:40:14

**Susan Rice**

There won't be, sadly, in all likelihood, legislation. I mean, I think there were points at which we thought we might get there with DACA and maybe with farm workers.

00:40:22

**David Axelrod**

But I mean, just in terms of the issue itself.

00:40:24

**Susan Rice**

With the the issue itself, David, look. That's why I began by saying it's one of the most difficult problems I've seen. It has become demagogued and politicized to, you know, an extraordinary extent. And we also have to separate legal immigration, which former President Trump did everything he possibly could to bring down to zero legal immigration, that we are a country of immigrants, except those of us who are Native Americans or African-Americans brought here under slavery. We're a nation of immigrants. And yet, you know, there was a concerted, multifaceted effort to make it very, very difficult, if not impossible, for people to come here legally. We need to build back our legal structures for immigration, including refugee processing and and the like. At the same time, in my opinion, we've got to continue to try to ensure that there are consequences for those who come here without authorization, who come here illegally. And we have to make it possible for those that, you know, might choose to come here illegally to have a a legal, legitimate pathway to to do so in the alternative. And so what we had put in place is in the in the last year plus of the Biden administration was a combination of these two tools, consequences and enhanced legal pathways. And that led to for a substantial period of time the numbers of Venezuelans, of Cubans, of Nicaraguans and Haitians going way down.

00:42:04

**David Axelrod**

Ticking up again now.

00:42:05

**Susan Rice**

It's starting to pick up again. And what's challenging about the way it's ticking up, is it's not predominantly the number of single adults that is rising. We actually have managed to keep that relatively under control. It's now families. And families are really hard, because and on the one hand, that same rules need to apply to families. And yet, you know, we saw during the Obama administration, you know, what happens when you put families in detention.

00:42:35

**David Axelrod**

Yeah.

00:42:36

**Susan Rice**

And you're not, we're not legally allowed to detain families for more than 21 days.

00:42:42

**David Axelrod**

We're going to take a short break and we'll be right back with more of The Axe Files. And now back to the show. When you were sitting up there working on all these issues with your staff, your mighty staff of 40, and Ukraine was happening and other issues were happening and unfolding. Did you ever sort of get the urge to ankle on down to the Situation Room and say, I got a few thoughts on this? And did the president and others come to you and ask your thoughts on it or did you just stay in your lane?

00:43:28

**Susan Rice**

Well, I tried to stay in my lane.

00:43:30

**David Axelrod**

And how successful were you?

00:43:32

**Susan Rice**

Pretty successful. To put this in context. Jake Sullivan, who's the national security adviser, who is doing, I think, a very good job in very difficult circumstances, is one of the few people like me who's worked on both domestic and national security issues. During the Biden campaign, he was doing, running policy, mostly domestic policy. So he could have been in my lane and probably with much more justification, because I was a newbie to this realm, whereas he's worked in national security for a long time. I could have been in his lane. That would have been just complicated and messy. And so we had a very constructive and respectful relationship. But, you know, he would occasionally ask me my views. I would ask him for advice and and thoughts and perspectives. So it was it was collegial and collaborative. But, you know, I had plenty to do to worry about without trying to. When asked for my thoughts and judgments, I tried to.

00:44:28

**David Axelrod**

Well, let me ask you about Ukraine, because the war drags on. As we speak, zelensky is in this country. Partly he's here because there's a debate now about additional funding for Ukraine. And this, too, has become more and more polarized by party. Do you worry, as I do, that as this war drags on and if it drags on and you're in a kind of grim stasis where, you know, you're making incremental progress, that the politics will shift on this issue? It feels like that the Ukrainians are in a race not against their own will or desire to fight, but the politics of all the other countries who are supporting them, principally ours. And pretty clearly, you know, Trump has a very different point of view on Ukraine. And Putin seems content to play a waiting game here. How do you see where we are right now? And then what has to happen in the near term on this issue?

00:45:30

**Susan Rice**

Well, I mean, I think it's clear from some of the polling that, you know, support is softening for the war in Ukraine. However, there are still majorities of of the American public that understand the stakes and think that we have essentially struck the right balance of providing support to the Ukrainian cause without committing U.S. forces and without it spiraling into a wider war. I think people give the president a great deal of credit, well deserved, for striking that balance and holding NATO together. Having said that.

00:46:09

**David Axelrod**

The three leading Republican candidates all oppose additional aid and have talked about, you know, imposing peace.

00:46:17

**Susan Rice**

Of course, but the Republican Party is divided on this. And larger numbers of Republicans. I mean, you would know this better than I, not, Trump and DeSantis aside, they still support.

00:46:29

**David Axelrod**

And Ramaswamy.

00:46:31

**Susan Rice**

Do you even count him?

00:46:32

**David Axelrod**

Well, they do. He's third he's third in the.

00:46:35

**Susan Rice**

Depending on what. He's.

00:46:37

**David Axelrod**

Anyway.

00:46:37

**Susan Rice**

I'm not wasting time on Ramaswamy. Large numbers of Republicans still do see the necessity of supporting Ukraine. And David, I think, you know, the challenge that we face is being as plain as we can about what this is about. I mean, there is no question in my mind that if Putin is allowed to bite off a large share of Ukraine and hold it and get away with it, that he's not going to stop there. He didn't stop after Georgia. I mean, let's be honest, we've learned this the hard way. He didn't stop after Crimea. And I don't think he's going to stop unless he is stopped. And that has direct implications for NATO countries and for, you know, larger global security. So I think we have got to be patient. We've got to be resolute. Our investment in this is, you know, it's not insignificant in terms of dollars and humanitarian assistance. But in the grand scheme, it's modest compared to being at war. And that's what we're trying to forestall.

00:47:44

**David Axelrod**

But there is this new isolationism. You know, I think that if I'm Zelensky, I'm watching this with great concern, because there may come a time when when the argument you just made, which I agree with, doesn't carry the day or at least doesn't carry the day with the policymakers in this country.

00:48:03

**Susan Rice**

Look, we don't need to get deeply into what Trump's motivations are vis a vis Russia. But I do think there is, in the mainstream of our body politic, an understanding that when you let dictators have their will, the consequences for us are going to be grave. And what messages would a Putin victory in Ukraine give to China? I mean, we just gotta realize that we're not living anymore in a world in which nation states are sufficiently deterred from taking their neighbors' territory. And we've got to reestablish that. Otherwise, we're going to have chaos, and American young men and women are going to be in harm's way again.

00:48:47

**David Axelrod**

I want I want to ask you, we talked the last time we were on this podcast together.

00:48:53

**Susan Rice**

That was a long time ago.

00:48:53

**David Axelrod**

It was. But some of these issues are evergreen. But it's really clear now. I mean, and you spent your whole life in foreign policy trying to navigate the tug of war between the sort of realpolitik concerns of of of our national interest and values that go to human rights. And, you know, president recently, I mean, he's been very much courting India, where there have been real human rights issues. He went to Vietnam. He's courting Vietnam where there are real human rights issues. And it's in service of building this coalition to resist Chinese hegemony. How do you make these judgments, and how do you stand up as a beacon for human rights and for democracy and still enlist people as allies who don't necessarily embrace those? It's kind of, it's a messy business.

00:49:49

**Susan Rice**

It is. This is the perennial challenge of U.S. foreign policy in the 20th and 21st centuries. I mean, this is nothing new. We've always had this tension and this challenge to navigate the balance between our interests and our values when they diverge. Now, often our interests and values converge. And that's, you know, that's when things are relatively straightforward. But whether we're talking about U.S. policy in the Middle East, whether we're talking about U.S. policy in Latin America or Africa, now, of course, in Asia, that there has always been a need to manage in what is a difficult gray area between, you know, standing up for our security interests and our values. And they sometimes conflict. And there's just no sugarcoating that. And anybody who says, you know, well, it's one or the other and we can't, you know, work to do both really don't. in my opinion, understand the complexities we're facing.

00:50:58

**David Axelrod**

In an age of propaganda, though, these conflicts get promoted as signs of hypocrisy, and that adds to the complexity.

00:51:06

**Susan Rice**

There's no question. There will always be absolutists. Rarely those who have actually had the firsthand experience of trying to figure out how to balance these challenges. They're advocates on the outside, and their job is to push people on the inside. But rarely is it feasible to be absolutist on one side or the other. There are all the, you know, there's the Kissingerian realpolitik types who, even there, even there, you know, there's a recognition that we do have values and principles to uphold. And then there's the, you know, the advocates who would say everything should be viewed through a lens of democracy and human rights. I'm a huge believer in the importance of promoting democracy and human rights. And I think that's got to be a centerpiece of our foreign policy. And so that's part of what we're dealing with in Ukraine, by the way, is standing up for, you know, those principles. You know, it's why the United States, under President Obama and now under President Biden, has been such a leader in trying to advocate for the protection of LGBTQ rights globally, where in places like Uganda, you know, your life can be at stake. So we've got to stand up for our values and principles. And yet at the same time, you know, we've got to make, you know, difficult tradeoffs. So, you know, take the president's visit to Vietnam. You know, President Obama also went to Vietnam. I joined him on that visit. You know, Vietnam is a communist country, and yet it's a country that is feeling squeezed by China, particularly in the South China Sea. That it is a country where, you know, when we're trying to diversify, diversify our supply chains and not be solely beholden to things made in China when China could cut those off, that we look to that to be an alternative source of, you know, everything from sneakers to to chips. Right. And so we got to balance those things. And it's never going to be perfectly neat or pretty.

00:53:12

**David Axelrod**

You, in my view, were sort of victimized during the end of our administration, the Obama administration, or the end of the first term when Benghazi happened. I was. We talked about this the last time. I was around and aware of sort of you getting thrust on to TV and basically sharing information that was given to you by the intelligence community with all good, in all good conscience, because that's what they thought the information was. It cost you. There was this lingering thing that was sort of reverberating out there, particularly in right wing media. Now you see this impeachment inquiry going on. And I'm just wondering whether you're having sort of flashbacks as you watched the Republicans, ironically weaponizing the government under the guise of being against the weaponized weaponization of government. Whether you have flashbacks of your own experience.

00:54:07

**Susan Rice**

No, no I don't. I wrote a lot about Benghazi and how that how I experienced it, how it shaped me in my memoir, "Tough Love." And I try to be as candid as I possibly could. That was, you know, a very infuriating, frustrating experience. And I agree it's had some lingering effects. Diminishing, and I think, you know, it's not something I think about on a on a regular basis at this point. But so I don't have the flashbacks or PTSD or whatever. But what it does remind me is, you know, how crass and disingenuous the motivations are for this impeachment inquiry. What, the play that that they are running is the play that they ran on Secretary Clinton through the 12 hours of Benghazi hearings and, you know, basically muddying her up.

00:55:04

**David Axelrod**

Which, which high Speaker McCarthy at the time acknowledged was the play.

00:55:10

**Susan Rice**

Right. And now they're trying to, because, now they're trying to muddy President Biden, where there's nothing there. And, and it's just.

00:55:16

**David Axelrod**

Well, there are clearly issues relative to Hunter Biden. They're not. But they have not made a link to the president.

00:55:23

**Susan Rice**

That's my point. My point is that an impeachment is supposed to be for high crimes and misdemeanors committed by a president while in office. While in office. Let's not forget that. And there is nothing about this that suggests that there's any evidence of that. And, but they found, as Kevin McCarthy admitted, that they can do a lot of damage to a candidate as they did to Secretary Clinton by just creating the false impression of something wrong. And so that's the play they're trying to run on President Biden, because, you know, they've got, they're looking to likely to nominate somebody who's been indicted four times.

00:56:10

**David Axelrod**

The other thing that is out there and is being broadly discussed right now is the president's age. You worked with him. I mean, I think a lot of it has to do with his public presentation. But tell me what your experience was in working with him on actual issues.

00:56:26

**Susan Rice**

Yeah, thank you for asking. Because, you know, I've spent a lot of time with President Biden in over the last two and a half years. And I can tell you, having worked with him also while he was vice president, that he is perfectly capable of and is running the presidency with all competence, firing on all cylinders, making decisions, you know, setting strategies. I have I had no experience in my two and a half years in this fine White House that left me with any concern that he was anything other than fully capable of doing the job of president. That's the honest truth.

00:57:09

**David Axelrod**

Lastly, since we're on the subject of age, you're a veritable kid by today's standards.

00:57:14

**Susan Rice**

Hardly. I used to be.

00:57:16

**David Axelrod**

And. And I'm wondering. You're a lifer in public service, and I'm wondering if you're done with public service or whether you foresee another chapter in the future. You're now, you're.

00:57:30

**Susan Rice**

I'll say it.

00:57:30

**David Axelrod**

Double vested.

**Susan Rice** 00:57:32  
I'm 58.

**David Axelrod** 00:57:33  
Yes, but you are, you have now significant experience on both sides of the ledger, domestic and national security. Do you see yourself doing something in the future, in government, in politics or both?

**Susan Rice** 00:57:47  
I don't rule it out. I don't.

**David Axelrod** 00:57:48  
You talked about running for the Senate at one point.

**Susan Rice** 00:57:50  
I thought about it for a little while in Maine, decided it wasn't the right time or place or choice for me. But, you know, I learned after the end of the Obama administration, when I really thought I was done with government, to not be so sure and to not be categorical. If you had asked me in 2017 when we turned out the lights in the Obama White House or even in 2019 when I wrote my memoir and published it whether I expected to come back into government, I would have said no. And, you know, I had no idea at the time that that I would be seriously considered and vetted to be vice president. I had no idea that I would come back into the White House and work on domestic policy, of all things. And I enjoyed that experience of working on domestic policy enormously. I love serving. So I'm not prepared to say hell no, but I'm also not living my life in preparation or anticipation or calculation to do that. I will be perfectly happy and content if I never serve again and can look back on the service that I've been privileged to do. I feel very good about it and very grateful. So I'm not hankering to do it, but I'm not ruling out doing it.

**David Axelrod** 00:59:15  
We'll keep an eye on that. Well, thank you for the service and thank you for your friendship. It's always great to see you.

**Susan Rice** 00:59:20  
Thank you, David, for yours, as well.

**Outro** 00:59:24  
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