

**The David and Barbara Pryor Center
for
Arkansas Oral and Visual History**

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Arkansas Memories

Asa Hutchinson

Interviewed by John C. Davis

March 3, 2025

Fayetteville, Arkansas

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- Em dashes separate repeated/false starts and incomplete/redirected sentences.
- Ellipses indicate the interruption of one speaker by another.
- Italics identify foreign words or terms.
- Brackets enclose
 - italicized annotations of nonverbal sounds, such as laughter, and audible sounds, such as a doorbell ringing; and
 - annotations for clarification and identification.
- Commas are used in a conventional manner where possible to aid in readability.

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John C. Davis interviewed Asa Hutchinson on March 3, 2025, in Fayetteville, Arkansas.

[00:00:00]

John Davis: Today is March 3, 2025, and we're at the David and Barbara Pryor Center for Oral and Visual History. I'm John Davis. Here with me is Asa Hutchinson. And we are in our second part of a two-part Arkansas oral history interview with former governor Hutchinson. Um—again, on behalf of the Pryor Center, I wanna thank you for sitting down with us. Uh—when we previously spoke, we concluded—um—that segment just—just before we get to 2014, which is a—a momentous time in—in your personal political history, but also Arkansas's political history, and we decided—uh—at that time that it was a good—a good break point. So—uh—I am thankful that you decided to come back and share more stories with us today.

[00:00:52] So if we start at 2014 or thereabouts, maybe a little bit earlier—um—if you would, explain the process of deciding, you know, to run again—um—and—and—and some of the—the key goals, the key—uh—elements of that campaign.

Asa Hutchinson: Well, I mean, first of all, in 2013 I was still practicing law up here in Rogers. But I had—uh—been around the state speakin' at Lincoln Day dinners and different—uh—Republican functions, stayin' in touch—uh—across the electorate. And—uh—I had an interest in it. Uh—you know, I had lost to Mike Beebe in 2006, but he will be term limited, and so it's an open seat. And it was a unique time because—uh—the Republicans did not have a clear statewide figure ready to run for that. And so some of the young leadership of the party—uh—came to me and said, "This is your time. We'd love to see you—uh—run." Uh—and but there were others that were looking at it. Uh—and so the process of making that decision was—uh—I was ready to do it. Susan had blessed it. And that's quite something because at that point, we had lost three statewide races. Uh—United States Senate, Attorney General, and the governor the first time. [00:02:24] And in modern political history, there's not many that lose and have another chance at redemption. And so—uh—that was a tough decision for us 'cause, you

know, we did not want to go down in history as— as having failed in another statewide race. Uh—and she wanted me to win. And so that was really the—uh—you know, knowing how much was at risk, it was a big decision. It was not just a governor's race. It was—it was—uh—my political history, really, that we were putting on the line, and my legacy. Uh—and so she supported that. And—uh—you know, but there were others that were looking at it. [00:03:06] Uh—for example, Tim Griffin. Uh—he was—had left—uh—the Congress. He'd decided to come back home, and he was looking at running that, but he didn't, ultimately. I jumped out there early. And we had some opposition in the Republican primary. But—uh—me getting out there early—uh—solidifying support, put me in a good position in the Republican primary.

JD: If you would, eh—explain the—the differences in dynamics between 2006 and 2014. Uh—much had happened in the state politically, and I wonder if that reverberated back to—to your particular campaign.

[00:03:47] AH: Well, it did. And to put it in perspective, of course,

in 2006 we were a Democratic state. Uh—in 2010, as late as that, we were still a blue state. In 2010 you still had the constitutional officers Democrat. You had—the majority of our federal offices were Democrat. County officials, legislature, Democrat. That's 2010. I'm running in 2013, 2014. And so—but the dynamic had changed. We had become more conservative. Republicans had continued to increase its margin even though we were still—uh—not winning—uh—many of the statewide races. And so the dynamics had changed. [00:04:36] Of course—uh—President Obama bein' in office was not popular in Arkansas. And his Obamacare, his everybody-had-to-buy-insurance plan, was not selling well in the state and shifted it, even, to a higher extent over to the Republican side. And that would prove to be a significant issue in the campaign as well.

[00:05:02] JD: So I was wonderin'—at this point, you—you are—you have your party's nomination. You go into the general election—uh—and you're competing against Mike Ross, former Congressman in the—uh—south, southwest Arkansas district. Um—tell me about the—the campaign and some of the key issues in 2014.

AH: Well, of course, we started in 2013 raising money, made the announcement—uh—outta the gate. But Mike Ross in his first

finance report announced that he had raised, I believe it was, \$3 million. And that was the first quarter. And it was a stunning figure. It had never been done in Arkansas. And that really caught everybody's attention. And so you know, we had raised at that point less than a million. He had raised 3 million. And so once again [*laughs*] it looks like we're gonna be outspent in this race. And so that was a real tense time. And of course, the poll numbers were close, but you know, he had the edge in 2013. [00:06:17] You go into 2014 and—uh—he had spent a lot of the money unwisely. He—uh—had a—had an early TV buy. And whenever he went down, the Republican Governors Association came in with a buy for me. And—uh—that—and he never responded to that. And so that helped us to shape the debate. And so—uh—even though he started out with that fundraising edge—uh—and he continued to have that fundraising edge, we were—had some good support with the RGA, and our media program was much better, and the timing of it was much better. So by mid-2014, it had shifted, the momentum in the race had shifted, and our first poll had me ahead. And we maintained that through the end—uh—until November. We had debates—uh—but the debates were—uh—as long as you hold your own and as long as you—uh—don't flub anything, you're okay in that.

Uh—and it was really ironic that—uh—Mike Ross—uh—he was really tryin' to out-conservative me. And so I came out with—uh—my key issues were, I wanted to do a \$100 million tax cut. Uh—I wanted to put computer coding in every high school. And I wanted to shrink the size of state government. Those are three simple issues that I campaigned on. But the \$100 million tax cut—he was sayin' that was—that was—uh—too little. And he had some extraordinary amount that he wanted to do for a tax cut. And I stuck with \$100 million. I believed it was the right number. I thought it was—uh—realistic and doable and that his was pie in the sky. And I think it showed that he was grasping a little bit. [00:08:21] But the—the key issue that I think defined us was that very odd—uh—issue of computer coding in every classroom. And my—uh—son-in-law Dave came to me—and this would've been in 2013. He says, "You better grab hold of this issue. Uh—or somebody else will." And so I made a speech—I believe it was the Political Animals Club there in Little Rock in 2013. And I outlined my priority for computer coding in the high schools. And the response was so lukewarm. The response was, "He thinks he's gonna get elected on this coding issue that nobody really understands?" Uh—but we stuck with it. And it was so specific. And we put a million dollars in

ads covering that that—it gave me credibility in education. Because most people say, "We're gonna improve education." Well, I said, "We're gonna put computer coding in every high school." And then I illustrated it with my granddaughter—uh—Ella Beth, with commercials that were really—had some—uh—awards. So—uh—that issue, I think—uh—strengthened me—uh—as a Republican candidate, you know, pushing education, tax cuts, conservative issues, but also promoting education.

[End of verbatim transcription]

[00:09:46] JD: We've touched on this a little bit in our first segment. Particularly in the 1980s, you're running against, you know, a Dale Bumpers. You're running against these key, you know, figures in that day, and you're operating at a steep disadvantage. Was the tone of the campaign in 2014—I mean, where you had the feeling of the wind kind of at your back, was that in some ways exhilarating? In some ways maybe—or do you think because of your history in losing and having, you know, having to fight these contests as the underdog that you appreciated it more, or is there something about this that you found yourself enjoying more, maybe? I—for lack of a better term.

AH: Well, absolutely. I enjoyed it more because we had greater level

of support. We had the funding that was needed. You know, we brought in other governors to campaign for me, which we had done in previous races, but the crowd response was incredible. So yes, it was a different feeling altogether. [00:10:53] And I looked at the race that my strength was in Northwest Arkansas. And then Mike Ross's strength was in South Arkansas. Central Arkansas probably, you know, fairly well split. The key was Jonesboro, Northeast Arkansas. And so I focused on that from the very beginning. And whenever I built that core of support in Northeast Arkansas, raised money there—and they took such pride in raising money that—it was a different feel. It was a totally different feel, and we continued to build momentum through the campaign.

[00:11:36] JD: I imagine you would've enjoyed it more. We've talked about many—and not just you, of course, but there was a time not that long ago when Republicans would almost be left feeling unwelcome or a lukewarm reception at best at different festivals and parades and rallies. And then by 2014 your party is growing in its majority status in both the Senate and the House. Things are changing, and you're at the tip of the spear, so to speak, into this new future for Arkansas.

AH: That's right, and the first thing that changes is the electorate.

And but it's a little bit more gradual process with the fundraising side. And that's why, you know, the lobbyists, many of them, their first inclination is, "Well, Mike Ross, you know, he's raised \$2 million or \$3 million early on. He's got the momentum. He's got the strength." And so it takes a little bit longer to change the culture and the apparatus of politics. But you know, over time—they first—they just start playin' both sides, and then they see the strength on the Republican side, and it does give you more momentum. And that transition actually happened during our campaign. You could see the shift from the political base in Arkansas over to the Republican side as we gained strength, obviously, continuing to grow in the polls.

[00:13:05] JD: If you would, tell me about Election Night. You had won other contests. This wasn't a first for you. But to win a statewide election, to win it quite decisively—tell me about that experience.

AH: Well, it was an extraordinary night. First of all, it's very important for my family because my family, my four children, Susan, they have been through losing campaigns. They didn't wanna see Dad lose. And so it was a big night for them. And they were invested in it. And so it was really a family experience and a reward for all the labors that everybody had put in. But

that night—course any candidate—you know, the polls close at seven thirty. And so you anticipate, you know, the polling numbers coming in gradually over the next two and a half hours, and maybe by ten o'clock, you'll get a sense as to where you are in the race, and around ten o'clock you'll make a victory speech, perhaps. Hopefully. But you always expect that adrenalin rush as those numbers come in. Well, with today's polling numbers, it always doesn't work out that way. [00:14:24] So the polls close at seven thirty. I'm getting ready for this exciting night. And my family bein' there. And all of a sudden at seven thirty-one, I get a call on the phone. It's an unknown number, but I go ahead and answer it. And it's President Barack Obama. He's calling me and saying, "Congratulations, Asa, for winning the governor's race." This is seven thirty-one. And I said, "Mr. President, you mean they've called the race?" And he says, "Well, yes. You've won." And that was the first time I knew. So it's ironic that a Democratic president calls up a Republican, newly elected governor and announces basically the whole shift from the Democratic side to the Republican side, the sweep that night. And that's who got to announce it to me.

[00:15:14] JD: [Laughs] So you—one thing we forget, often, is that—and this is not unique to Arkansas. But when you are

newly elected in November of an election cycle, you have a short amount of time before—that Election Night and the balloons and the confetti and all that good stuff, and then reality has to set in. And you're building an administration. And you, really, from the oath of office, you have a very short time to put together a legislative agenda for that first general session. If you would, run us through that process of building your team, transitioning from campaign to administration, and then we'll get into some of those legislative goals that you had early on.

[00:16:02] AH: Well, of course, I didn't wanna jinx anything, so I was very cautious about a transition team. And as they say, you don't wanna measure the drapes before you get in there. So even though I'd given some thought to who my transition team would be, we'd really not had that pushed forward. And so Election Night we win, but I immediately the next day set up my transition team. I asked Mike Carroll, my good friend from Fort Smith, to head that up. And then we put a team together on that where they went into each department, did a review, made a report to us. And so it was really organized during that time, and we utilized it very effectively from a November election result into January. But that was picking personnel, my chief of staff, the transition team. But the heads of the departments,

that was where the—you were consumed. But for example, we went—I wanted to make sure that Northeast Arkansas knew how much I appreciated them. And I went up there and announced Alec Farmer to be my first appointment on the Highway Commission even before I was elected governor 'cause that was one—somethin' I had promised. That's somethin' that they wanted, and I knew exactly what I wanted to do. So that's the kind of thing we did during the transition. [00:17:31] In terms of the agenda, we immediately went to work meeting with Department of Finance. And of course, I'm meeting with, you know, many who had served for eight years under the Beebe administration. And the first thing we had to do was to change the culture. And I made it clear—I said, "Look, I've promised a \$100 million tax cut, and if you're not willing to come in here and give me proposals on how we're gonna pay for a tax cut and fund government, then you need to leave because we're havin' tax cuts. And they understood the mission, and they did it, but it was a new culture for them. And it was also a new culture when it came to, you know, looking at the budget more carefully and not just adding to it every year, reducing the regulatory burden. That was a new environment that a Republican governor brought in.

[00:18:26] JD: If I remember correctly, there was emphasis early on in your administration, and it really continues through both terms, of trying to not only get a fiscal house in order—and obviously there's a mandated constitutional balanced amendment—but to also build a cushion, for lack of a better word. And we can talk—you know, there's different funds and different things like that. But I seem to recall that that was low when you came into office, is that right?

AH: It was actually gone. [*Laughs*] And so, yeah, there are—actually for 100 years of Democratic rule or more, the plan had been that we would forecast our revenue, and then we would spend to that forecast and basically spend all of it. And so each year they did not carry over reserve funds or rainy-day funds. They spent those. And so we didn't have those kind of reserves as I came in as governor. And of course, over eight years we went from zero dollars in reserves to \$3 billion in reserve that I left my successor. [00:19:42] And so that was a change as well. And the legislature helped to drive that. We won control, the Republicans did, and this was very important to Jimmy Hickey, who was Senate pro tem during part of my governorship. And they drove the long-term savings as well as myself. And the first couple years budgetary-wise were fairly

tough. We had a \$100 million tax cut, and I don't think we did as good a job of forecasting as perhaps we should have, and we got better at it over time, but we actually had to use to revolut—the RSA, the . . .

JD: Revenue Stabilization Act?

AH: Revenue Stabilization Act to cut back on some of the spending for a few months, and then we recouped the revenues and came in. And we wound up fillin' the budget every year. But it was a little bit tighter in the first couple of years.

[00:20:48] JD: What—I guess one thing that I'm curious about for anyone coming into that role, obviously there's gonna be surprises. There's gonna be things you can anticipate and things you cannot anticipate. What's something that, coming into the role day one—what surprised you? What was something that you may have been unaware of, that looking back, you know, you—maybe you wish you'd known goin' in day one.

AH: Well, the biggest decision I had to make was the Medicaid expansion in Arkansas and whether it was gonna continue. And so that was something I had to cautiously deal with during the campaign. I never made a commitment. I said that I would look at it. And I knew that the Republican base support was—anything about Obamacare, they were opposed to, and the

Medicaid expansion was part of Obamacare. And so that was a very sensitive issue during the race, and I stayed neutral on it. But once I became governor, I had to deal with that issue, and I had to make a decision. And I made an announcement that I'm going to announce my decision on Medicaid expansion. I was gonna make a speech at UAMS. And many of the advisors said, "You know, that's a little bit flamboyant [*laughs*], you know, to have an announcement like that." But it really went off well. I explained my reasoning for it, my support for it, because it helped the state financially to such a great extent as well as, clearly, expanded health care into our rural communities, helped us to keep our rural hospitals open. But I also had to outline the savings that we were gonna create over five years through improved utilization of Medicaid and its programs. [00:22:49] So I made that speech, and that helped set the stage for very difficult expansion of the Medicaid. And I knew that it took a three-fourths vote for an appropriation bill to pass, which is extraordinary. But until you actually have to deal with passing appropriation bills with a 75 percent vote, you don't realize how tough it is. So that's probably the biggest surprise that I had. And whenever it came to the appropriation for Medicaid, it was really, really hard in those early years to get to that 75 percent.

[00:23:26] JD: I seem to remember there would be many votes on occasion. You know, it wasn't just passed. It—there was a lot of negotiation and discussion among the chambers. And I—so to this point on paper, you know, you had the con—you know, constitutional offices were Republican. The House and the Senate were majority Republican and gaining almost every two years during that time period. So on paper it would look like almost anything would sail through. But you had a majority of Republicans, many of whom probably felt like they had run against Medicaid expansion, they had run against—or Obamacare, to be specific or more broadly. So was it difficult to have members sort of come to terms or sort of moderate or at least be open to this Medicaid expansion package, even with cost savings? Did they feel that they could go back home and explain that to their constituents?

[00:24:25] AH: Oh, it was very tough. I mean, the Democrats were largely in favor of Medicaid expansion. The Republicans were split on it. And that made it very difficult. And it was issues in their campaigns, and many of them had made promises. "I will not vote for Obamacare. I oppose Obamacare." And they made those commitments, and that made it very, very difficult. And so it took multiple votes to get it passed. But the hurdle that we

got over—in fact, one year it was just—we were locked in at, I think it was, seventy-three votes. And we tried it multiple times, and we couldn't get over that hump. And so I had meditated on this, and I came up with a unique strategy that'd never been done in Arkansas. And you have your appropriation bill, and I had them write the appropriation bill that—it would include the Medicaid expansion funding. And then they—course they voted against it because of that, and it couldn't pass. And then I had them redraft it to say Medicaid funding will not include any funding for the Medicaid expansion. And that allowed everybody who said, "I'm gonna vote against Obamacare" to vote for that, and they kept their commitment. When it got to my desk, I used my line-item veto pen to strike out that language, "This will not be used to fund Medicaid expansion." I struck that out. And they got—they were happy because they got to vote against Obamacare, but then I line-item vetoed, and they couldn't override the veto. And so that was a strategy that worked. And once we got over that hurdle, then it was—became really part of the fabric of our Arkansas health care system and part of the fabric of our funding. And so it became a diminished issue over time once we got over that hurdle.

[00:26:51] JD: And I think it was—was it the next session, perhaps,

where you were able to request a waiver from—was it the Trump administration at this point—for work requirements tied to it, which I think probably aided in some of the concerns some of the legislators had had.

AH: That's right. I wanted to put in a work requirement for able-bodied Medicaid recipients. And you know, if you had children at home, you were exempt from it. If you were not healthy, you were exempt from it. And the requirement was, you know, you either need to be working or you need to be in training for a better job or volunteer. And so—felt like it was very reasonable, and it certainly sold in Arkansas very well. The Trump administration approved it. It went into court. There's a lawsuit that was filed. And we ultimately lost that before the DC Court of Appeals, where they said Medicaid is to expand health care coverage, and part of the purposes of it is not to give financial independence. So we lost in court. We tried to get to US Supreme Court. And that's when Trump went out of office and Biden went into office. And so Biden reversed the position. The Department of Justice no longer supported that, and so it just died on the vine because of the change in administration.

[00:28:16] But we did pursue the work requirement. That helped us get the votes as well with that more conservative

strategy.

JD: I have a few specific policy issues that I wanna ask you about, but at this point, we've talked a little bit about tax cuts, we've talked about Medicaid expansion. We'll get into an event that, you know, could not have been in any way expected, which was the pandemic in your second term. But what other issues, particularly in your first four years, do you—are you most keen to talk about and share with us?

[00:28:54] AH: Well, I mean, first of all, I had the philosophy that we're here to solve problems. And so we had our agenda items, which the first year was the tax cuts, which we followed up, really, and every time the legislature met, we further reduced our state income tax rate. But it was income tax cuts. And then it was, you know, computer coding, computer science in the schools that we continued to build in Arkansas, which was a great success story. Moved us to a national leader in that. And then, you know, revising and making government more efficient. Those were my three priorities in my first term. We expanded those priorities in the second term with a very aggressive agenda. But despite my agenda, I wanted to be able to solve problems. And so I didn't campaign on it, but foster care was a challenge for us. We had a foster-care crisis in Arkansas, and I

started the Restore Hope initiative. That did two things. One, it would help us to recruit more foster parents. It would revise our foster-care system within the government, Department of Human Services. Then we also focused on giving people a second chance. And that was the re-entry program of people coming out of prison, to help them to get a job and to be productive in society again. And that was my Restore Hope initiative that we partnered with faith-based organizations. And that still exists today. It has made a difference in, really, hundreds if not thousands of lives.

[00:30:39] JD: Well, and probably—a point of personal privilege because I'm a professor here at the University of Arkansas. But another thing you did was undergo or lead the rather dramatic change in the funding formulas for institutions of higher education that I think—you know, again, a problem that Arkansas has had for a long time has been college attainment. And in that puzzle has been low retention. And I think—I don't wanna speak for you. I'd like you—to hear from you, of course, but your funding formula tried to, I think, address, and I think did dramatically improve, both of those metrics. I wonder if you could share a little bit about that.

AH: That's another example of tryin' to solve a problem. Whenever I

saw our higher education budget, and it was a—based upon an agreement that had been reached decades before whe—and higher education had changed since then. And it was a formula of money bein' distributed that was not based upon success. It was not based upon student progress. And so we wanted to change that, and I had the higher-education team work on that with our institutions, and we came up with a new formula, the Productivity Funding Formula, that did reward those that were reducing retention rates, that were tryin' to have a degree program that a student could graduate in four years versus six years because all of that meant it was more affordable for the student. [00:32:26] That, you know, would make progress in affordability, in making sure that they were efficient in their operations. And so all of that was part of the formula, and we had to put more money into it to make that successful. And so while—during this time other states were, particularly red states, were decreasing funding in higher education, we actually increased funding to make sure that new formula for distribution rewarding schools would be effective.

JD: I know also—and we've touched on this a little bit, right, but the transformation of state government and government services was also something that was, particularly in your first

administration on into your second, was important. And I'm thinking of, really, the first revamping of state government in Arkansas in decades. I wonder if you wanted to speak to that as well.

AH: I will. But as I went into my second four-year term, I really believed based upon my experience that if you wanna accomplish something, you need to make it a campaign issue. You need to tell 'em in advance. You need to spend your advertising dollars. "This is what I'm gonna do." It builds support in the legislature. It builds public support for it. And so I worked on that second-term agenda early on. And we came up with the Four Ts, which was tax cuts, it was transformation of state government, it was a new highway plan, transportation, and it was teacher pay. So the Four Ts. It was a very ambitious agenda for my second term. It was a stronger, heavier agenda even than my first term. [00:34:26] When it came to the transformation of state government, I had looked at this all my life, actually. And I remember Dale Bumpers as he was governor. He implemented transformation as one of his achievements, and then it was quickly, after that, dismantled. And he had reduced it, I think, to maybe, you know, seventeen cabinet members, something—number like that. They had

gradually grown to where I had forty-two direct reports to me of cabinet officials. And as I said, if you gave your cabinet one hour a week, all of a sudden your forty-two hours of your week is already gone with cabinet meetings. And I said, "It's not an efficient way to do it, so we wanna transform it." And our plan was three purposes of it. One, we wanted to be able to make it—increase managerial control. That was my motivation. I can manage better if it's fifteen departments reporting to me versus forty-two. [00:35:36] Secondly, we wanted to make it more efficient where we could actually save money, make operations more efficient. Thirdly, we want to improve the delivery of services. So most people in transformation think about the cost savings part, but really the other two elements were critical as well. And so it was an issue in the campaign. We had town hall meetings promoting it. I had the organizational chart of state government, which looked like a spider's web. And the public easily supported transformation and reducing that to fifteen departments. And whenever it came to—you know, I had Mike Carroll, again, involved in it, a lot of my agency directors involved in the transformation. And it was a little tough for our cabinet people because when you're reducing from forty-two to fifteen, everybody's thinkin', "Am I gonna be in the cabinet

anymore?" And so you know, everybody had some turf involved in it as well. But ultimately, it—we wanted to hire a consultant. My transformation advisory board wanted to hire a consultant. We did. They came in and made some recommendations that were not politically doable. Many of 'em were unreasonable. But it was a necessary step to get to where we wanted to go. Ultimately I just looked at it informed as—based upon the recommendations we had how we're going to do the cabinet. [00:37:06] Probably the most unique is the transformation in shared services where I followed the model of when I was in Homeland Security where you—in state government, you would share—you would have an administrative group that would share services for personnel, for IT, and would serve the other departments of government. Much more efficient. So we presented to the legislature, and it was a really hard sell because you had legislators that heard from bankers or heard from others that said, "No, we don't want to be put into the Department of Commerce." And so there was some reluctance, but we did get it passed and—very successful and it accomplished the goals that I achieved. [00:37:58] One story on the—tryin' to get that through the legislature. It wound up bein' like a thousand-page bill. I mean, literally that thick. And

Senator Ron Caldwell was chairman of the committee that was looking at this. And he was not a fan, but he was committed to doin' what was needed and givin' it a fair hearing. So he opened up the markup on the bill, and he said, "Now let's go through this bill. Let's start with page one, line one." And every day he would go through it page by page by page. It was one of the longest markups I'd ever seen. But it passed out of his committee, and we got it passed.

[00:38:43] JD: And I think it's somethin' that people may not always know. We're used seeing on CSPAN, you know, gigantic omnibus bills in the House and Senate in the US Congress. But state legislature, for the most part, most of your bills are pretty small. They may be pulling language from existing code, but they—we're talkin' a few pages. So a very large bill is something that the legislators are not necessarily used to having to comb through in the middle of a session, no less.

AH: That's right. And it gives you a lot of room for mischief there. And one of the challenges was the Department of Agriculture, of course, maintained its strength. But the Farm Bureau always tried to make sure they had independent agencies in there like the Plant Board that had independent authority, was not answerable to anyone. And that was a little bit of a turf battle

there. We had to make some compromises. Department of Commerce in the same way that you had—and our banking department and our securities department, insurance department really did a nice job, and the industry took great pride in them. And so to put them under a Department of Commerce was a big change. We made sure they had their independent regulatory authority, but when it came to management and services within their departments, they were part of the Department of Commerce, and it really proved much more efficient.

[00:40:15] JD: I wonder, particularly in the transformation agenda—and you touched on this a moment ago, but maybe more broadly, were you able to pull from your presidential administration experience, particularly with Homeland Security and seeing reorganization in a way that is, you know, especially then was very pressing and urgent—were you able to pull from those experiences and apply it in this position?

AH: Oh, absolutely. Some of the models that we had came from the reorganization of the Department of Homeland Security and the transformation shared-services model that the private sector used. I brought the shared-services model in. But also the overall Cabinet of the President. The president doesn't sit in a

cabinet room with forty or fifty people. He has a cabinet room that has history and tradition, and that was a model that I wanted to see happen in Arkansas. I wanted to be able to bring my cabinet together and bring up an issue where there's fifteen in the room and say, "What's your advice to me on this?" And you have to have a small network to be able to do that.

[00:41:32] And one of the things that I did that was a great joy was that whe—the first term we had a small cabinet table, a small table in the governor's conference room, that was from Governor Donaghey and—I think a tree that fell in his yard. But it was probably, you know, eight feet long, perhaps. But there's no way that a cabinet can sit around the table, and it was in a very large conference room. And so I had a Arkansas cabinet maker make me a new cabinet table for fifteen people and the governor there that I left with the state. It was paid for with private funds. But it was exciting to be able to have that cabinet meet together for the first time.

[00:42:25] JD: And we've touched on a little bit about how some of your legislative goals sort of, you know, bleed over from the first to the second administration, but I don't wanna overlook your reelection campaign and how successful it was. I wonder were there any differences in that campaign cycle as an incumbent

that you found noteworthy, that you recall now that stand out.

AH: Well, I mean, first of all, I was challenged in the Republican primary by someone who—well, Jan Morgan, who said that she was a Trump spokesperson, a national spokesperson for Donald Trump. So she was coming at it as a Trump supporter, as someone that was pro-Second Amendment, which she was, and anti-Obamacare. And so really coming at it from the most conservative element of the party. And she was very forceful. She was dynamic. She had a radio show as well, a lot of radio support. And so it was a tough race in terms of having to put up with attacks. And but I knew that we were in good position and that you just had to endure that primary. And we wound up winning with 70 percent of the vote. And if I had done it differently my first four years, we might have wound up with 80 percent of the vote in the Republican primary or no Republican challenger. [00:44:17] But I made a decision that I wanted to govern for all of Arkansas and that I wanted to accomplish things and get things done and make decisions that didn't just appeal to the extreme elements of the Republican base. And so you have to endure that whenever you make that decision and— but winnin' 70 to 30's okay by me. And then the general election was really not much of a contest. You know, a good

person ran, Jared Henderson. We won 65 to 35 in the general election. And it just gave me an opportunity to make sure that my message as to what I wanted to accomplish, my Four Ts, were out there and had support.

[00:45:11] JD: One thing that I tend to think about when I think about this partisan change and the way that you're really sort of a bridge in there in many ways, but in this instance as governor, is your party, who's already enjoying momentum and majority status, is enhancing, increasing that, winning elections in places really almost inconceivable a few years prior. And I'm also reminded of a story. And I don't know that it's apocryphal. I seem to remember a story of John Brummett, I think, making a comment that once he overhears a discussion. And it goes something like this: Where you're talking to some legislators, and you say, "We've gotta show 'em we can govern." And I don't know that that was—you know, that's exactly what happened verbatim, but I think the example strikes a chord because your—on one hand, your party is, you know, in the driver's seat, but you are in, not completely uncharted waters, but unfamiliar waters somewhat as a Republican governor and with a Republican majority, which is unprecedented at this point. And I do wonder if there's—and it sounds like, you know,

you're—there's challenges from your own party, from maybe a more activist base that's maybe hit the pedal, the gas pedal, a little bit harder. And I just wonder if you wanna speak to the challenges of that. I mean, it—the challenges maybe from the legislators, even in your own party, who might be thinking of—the same way.

[00:46:43] AH: Well, that point is exactly right that I knew that if the Republicans were gonna win in future elections, this is a test 'cause this is the first time Republicans actually had control of the General Assembly and the Governor's Office. And it's a test as to whether you can govern. And we'd never had that experience before. We hadn't been in charge in well over 100 years in Arkansas, and now we have this opportunity. You have to show that you can govern. And Arkansas expects that of governors. And that's why, to me, it's the best job in America. You're held accountable. You're expected to produce things. And you work with both sides to get it done, and you solve problems. And you can't just kick it down the road. You can, perhaps, but that wasn't my approach. And so that was my view. And yes, the legislators have a little bit different view. Many of 'em have the same "Let's govern. Let's get things done." But then you also have some that say, "Look, my

constituents just simply elected me to be pro-gun, to oppose Obamacare, and to cut taxes, and I don't care about anything else." But it's also the social issues. I'm pro-life, but you know, they wanna make sure that they continue to pass pro-life bills, which I signed every one of those, but it was really—some of them had the attitude, "I've got to prove that I'm the most conservative person up here every day." And that can lead to bad outcomes.

[00:48:25] JD: And I—you know, we should point out just for note that you're governing in the *Roe v. Wade* era, and so there were on occasion bills, not just in Arkansas, that were passed that may or may not pass constitutional muster. And so you were right in the middle of that era as well.

AH: That's right. And I signed every pro-life bill that came to my desk, even though I might have questions about it. I think most of 'em actually were upheld, but might've been a couple of 'em struck down. But I believe that's how you actually move the needle constitutionally, and it actually proved successful because *Roe v. Wade* was reversed in my second term, and we already had the trigger bill in place that went back to a very restrictive abortion policy. And that's why Arkansas was known as the most pro-life state in the nation. And that was because of the

legislation we did while I was governor. [00:49:31] But there was a lot that came up that were simply challenges. We had the Religious Freedom Restoration Act that came up in my first term. And that was a little bit of a curve ball surprise to me, but it's an example of where it's, "Let's see how we can one up [*laughs*] what other states are doing or what the federal government has done." And so we passed a Religious Freedom Restoration Act whenever I was in Congress. We passed at the national level that tried to make sure that religious liberties are protected as you have government programs. And I was very supportive of passing similar legislation in Arkansas. But the bill that got to my desk went a little bit further, much further than what the federal legislation did. And so we ultimately sent it back. It was redone, which was catching a lot of national attention at the time. This was whenever Mike Pence was governor of Indiana, and he had the same controversy, then the same controversy came here because it was a national movement to pass some of these laws. And I did something very unique. It came to my desk, the revised version, and the national media was waiting outside in my conference room, and Mike Lamoureux was my chief of staff. And he says, "Asa, what are you gonna tell 'em?" And I said, "Well, I'm still thinkin' about it." [*Laughs*] And I

went out there and referenced my son Seth, who called and said he was opposed to it. And he was opposed to it because he thought it would be repressive on the diversity of our culture. And so I went out there to the national news conference, and I referenced that, and I said, "We can do it better. I wanna see it done just like we had it at the federal level." And so I didn't veto it. I didn't sign it. I sent it back for the legislature to correct it. Which I couldn't get by with in my second term, but in my first term, they took that, and they reworked it and brought back to my desk what I had asked for.

[00:51:56] JD: If you would, explain what—I think that's a really good point. Why would it have been different in your second term?

AH: Well, the second term, the legislature did not feel obligated to support me in everything because I was governor. They showed more independence. They saw—you know, as you're in your second term and you are term limited, you are actually at some point a lame duck. And so they're lookin' to the future. And so they became more difficult to get legislation passed that I wanted or—the friction just increased between the executive branch and the legislative branch. And I told them, you know, that that is the way our founding fathers designed it. That

friction is natural.

JD: And it's—yeah, exactly. And it's not unique to your time in office, either. I think what's unique to Arkansas, right, is that you had this growing majority and this party, and perhaps there's some intraparty factions, which have always been going on in one-party states. But we were seeing it for the first time among Republicans.

AH: We did. We had some division among the Republicans, although we've—we got what we wanted to get done. Very satisfied with the agenda items. But through the course of that there's always some friction that's created.

[00:53:26] JD: One thing that I feel we have to touch on—because you really became, I think, a leader for a sort of moderated stance on the issue at a time when there was a lot of confusion and chaos, and that's the global pandemic, the COVID-19 pandemic. If you would, run me through those early days, and then some of the measures that you took. And sometimes they were more [*laughs*] measured measures, if you will, to try to navigate the state and our health and economy through these unprecedented times.

AH: Well, it was unprecedented, it was historical, it was difficult for everyone. And whenever the—we saw the coronavirus hit China

first, and then it goes to Italy, and then it gets to the United States, first in Washington State. We're all watching this, and we're seeing in Washington State people are dying in the nursing homes. They don't have enough hospital beds. They don't have, you know, enough ventilators. And so they are stressed. And we say, "Is this what's gonna happen?" and our health care experts are sayin', "Yes. It going to get to Arkansas. It's just a matter of time." And when you hear that, it's really hard to grasp, but you know you've gotta plan. And so again, I called upon my background in Homeland Security handling emergencies, disasters, and even, you know, some of the health care emergencies we had during that time. [00:55:17] And so I put a team together, and we were prepared, and we made up our mind that when the first case hits Arkansas, I would declare an emergency so we can take the precautions that are needed to prevent the spread, to also make—to manage hospital space, to make sure we had room for those that needed care. And so our first case hit in mid-March, and it was a person that was down at Mardi Gras in Louisiana, came back to Pine Bluff, and coronavirus hit him, of course. And went to the hospital, and it spread from there. And it spread into Little Rock, and it just spread very, very quickly. And so we declared the emergency.

And I started, on the first day of the emergency, havin' a news conference. And I went down to the Department of Health to have a briefing. And I asked my Secretary of Health to join with me. Cam Patterson, UAMS director, was there as well, the chancellor of UAMS. And had a couple other health care professionals there, but I was there to answer questions. And they broadcast it statewide, broke into TV coverage, and then we continued to do that. And people relied upon it. And we ultimately had over 200 of those news briefings during the pandemic. And of all the things that we did, the communication was probably some of the most important. [00:57:04] Now I did have a few calls in to the office sayin', "You're—would you move the time of your daily briefing so I don't miss *Days of our Life*." They were a little upset about that part of it. We didn't move it, but they were always a little upset. But they tuned in because they wanted to hear the latest on what was happening and what was expected of them and that communication. Even to this day, people are comin' up and sayin', "I loved how you communicated during that pandemic. We relied upon it. We listened to it. We got hope from it."

[00:57:40] JD: And it was a level of transparency that we weren't seeing in all other places, whether it be states or, frankly, even

the federal level. So that doesn't surprise me that that's somethin' that you're approached with even today. Explain, if you would—'cause in those early months, you know, there was a real thought, a prevailing thought, that we'd be in economic disaster. You know, that as states locked down, as states took precautions, that state economies and really even—and because of that, right, the national economy would really nosedive. And Arkansas went through, navigated through that process relatively well. And I wonder if there are measures that you feel we took and—really, with your leadership—that helped propel us through that process.

[00:58:42] AH: Absolutely. Whenever you looked at what some other states were doing—they were sheltering in place. They required non-essential businesses to close. And if you worked in non-essential businesses, you couldn't go to work. And all of a sudden, we were getting letters from businesses all across Arkansas and the country sayin', "Please define us as an essential business so we don't have to close." And that just struck me as the wrong approach. And as I studied it—like Washington state, they had both essential businesses and non-essential businesses, but if you're an essential business, you could continue operating, which meant people were on the road,

they were goin' to work, and if there was coronavirus, it would spread through that. And so you're not doing a total sheltering in place. You're continuing commerce, you're just defining who can commute and go back and forth to work and who can make a living and who can't. And I said, "We're not gonna do that in Arkansas." My view was that if you work in a job, then you're an essential business. If you're a business that provides a job for a family, you're essential. And so everyone, you know, required restaurants to go to, you know, delivery, and we made some other constraints on some businesses like, you know, the personal services, the gyms that we have that had such close contact. But we refused to shelter in place. We kept our businesses open, and that made all the difference in the economic recovery. And it minimized the loss of jobs here in Arkansas. We didn't do it perfectly, but I was proud of the fact that we're one of only, I think, five states that refused to shelter in place. [01:00:50] We even had that pressure from President Trump. They wanted everybody to shut down during the pandemic. I'll never forget bein' on a call with the National Governor's Association with President Trump on there, Vice President Pence. And all the governors were there. And President Trump was chewing on, fussing at, Governor Brian

Kemp because he was opening up tattoo parlors. And he wa— and President Trump was tryin' to close things down. And so we lose sight a little bit of the fact that even states that later became very open actually had mask mandates, they had shelter-in-place requirements, but then as we learned, moved away from those. In Arkansas we never had a shelter-in-place order. We worked to keep our schools open. And we tried to minimize the mandates.

[01:01:44] JD: You mentioned a little bit on keepin' schools open and the importance of that and, you know, of course with—in addition to the precautions and things. I wonder if there's more there you wanted to share.

AH: Well, [*laughs*] when it came to the schools, in March of 2020 when the first cases hit here, the emergency was declared, no parent wanted their child to go to school. And so it was the kind of thing that the schools went virtual, but no one—even if they kept the schools open, no parent wanted to send their child there. And so that spring semester, all the schools across the country went virtual. I soon realized this is not good for Arkansas. Our rural schools did not have internet. They couldn't be—they couldn't operate virtually. It was a mess for parents that, you know, wou—didn't plan on havin' their children at

home. It was not good for child abuse. It was not good for their health, their meals. I mean, everything, every social network that is operated through the schools was gone. And so it was not a good environment. And of course, if you're virtual, anybody who loves sports knows that if the school's not open that day, you're not having the baseball season. You're not having basketball season. You're not having any of the sports or band or the extracurricular activities or the music. And this is such an incredible gap for our students. People need to understand how important letters are. And one of the most impressive letters I got was from a female volleyball student who said, "Please open the schools next year 'cause if you don't open the schools, Governor, we won't have volleyball. If we don't have volleyball, I will not have any chance for a scholarship." And it was signed by the whole volleyball team as well. And you know, that struck a chord with me. And so I proposed we're gonna keep the schools open for in-classroom instruction when we start in the fall. [01:04:03] Course in the summer, the cases went up. And schools were closed all across the country. I said, "No, we're gonna open with in-classroom instruction." They protested out in front of the mansion in coffins sayin', "You're gonna kills us." It looked like a lot of the

teachers, particularly in Pulaski County, would not show up. So we prepared substitute teachers from the Department of Education. We enhanced that. We were prepared to fill the gaps. And we started, and we kept at it, and we kept at it. The teachers were incredible. But the end story is that there was a study done and that Arkansas ranked number two in the nation in terms of in—days of in-classroom instruction during the pandemic. And so that's something I think we did right I was very proud of. [01:04:54] Just to paint the picture of the pandemic again, my good friend from Oklahoma, Kevin Stitt—he had to cancel an NBA game 'cause no one else would make the decision. And so in Arkansas we had actually the state basketball tournament going on. And I'm getting calls during the game from the head of the AAA, sayin', "What do we do? What do we do? What do we do?" And I'm thinkin', "Is that really the governor's call?" [*Laughs*] And so finally I said, "Let 'em finish the game." This is in, again, March of 2020. They'd already canceled the NBA season. They'd canceled the SEC tournament. They canceled all the basketball tournaments. And we have our state tournament still going on. And finally I said, "Fin—let 'em finish this game and shut the tournament down after that." Those are the kinds of decisions that wound up on

the governor's desk.

[01:05:57] JD: I think it's easy to forget what an uncertain time it was.

AH: That's right. It's easy to look back and think, "Oh my goodness, why would anybody say we need to wear a mask?" And you know, in hindsight, I could argue that 100 different ways. But at the time, I wanted to keep our businesses open and people working and people going to school, and really the only way to do that with any assurance that we're mitigating the spread was for people to wear a mask. And so you know, I reluctantly said, "We're going to have a very loose mask requirement if you are confined in a close environment." Created a great deal of controversy. Again, many, many states did that from Texas to Florida. And we had it for a short period of time. But that was the motivation was let's keep our state open, but let's also be considerate and try to reduce that spread. And that was the best health advice that I had. [01:07:07] When it came to the vaccine, we put no mandates in for the vaccine to be required because it was still—had not permanent approval. But I encouraged it. And we encouraged it by my wife and I, in front of statewide television, taking the vaccine ourselves, setting the example, going to town hall meetings across Arkansas

encouraging people to take the vaccine but not mandating it. So I think we tried to achieve the right balance through that. But clearly I think the big lesson learned is that states need to make their own decisions on those health care issues consistent with health science but also consistent with what is really tolerable in the culture in that state.

[01:08:06] JD: Course, this is occurring in your second term. And before that, I guess, you'd mentioned earlier that you were running on a very ambitious list of goals and platform going into the 2018 election, your reelection bid. And one of those issues was highways. And I was wondering if we could circle back, and you could then share the story of the highway funding and some of those debates and issues that you had to deal with as governor at the time.

AH: Well, before I got elected the—in the first term, during the campaign in 2014, the highway people came to me, businesses came to me, and clearly we needed a new [*laughs*] highway plan. We needed a better way to fund our highways because there were declining revenues. Whenever you have our—your tax base for highways based upon a gas tax and cars are becoming more efficient, that means declining revenue. And you have a growing need in the state because we're a growing state.

So we were behind in it. We needed a new plan. And the first term, though, I did not make it part of my agenda. If the legislature had come up with a plan, I would've obviously been excited about it. But they didn't. And I—and so I said, "We've got to address this in my second term." And so I made a commitment to address it. But the legislature, of course, wanted to be engaged in it, so when the legislative session started, I let them try to come up with a plan. And it could—it didn't happen. And they came to me and said, "We have to have governor's leadership on this if we're gonna pass a highway plan."

[01:10:04] And so I then started developing a very specific plan for it. And there was some urgency about it at that point. And so I put out my own plan. And no one had agreed to it yet. But I said—and I put that out just quietly. But then I announced that next Monday—this is like on a Friday. "Next Monday I'll be holding a news conference to announce the specifics of the governor's highway plan." [Laughs] And everybody looked at me and said, "Well, what's the plan? What's the plan?" So we put that together and negotiated over the weekend talkin' to Speaker Shepherd. I said, "We need you to be at the news conference on Monday," and he says, "What's the plan?" And it—and so really we negotiated over the weekend. It was a very,

very difficult negotiation because the truckers that were an important part of the coalition for it had very specific demands as to state contribution for that plan. So we announced it that included some casino revenues going to the highways, state commitment of revenues going to the highways. But the big thing was the extension of the half-cent sales tax. So it's not a new tax—new tax, but it's an extension of an existing half-cent sales tax that became permanent. And we got that referred out of legislature, took a vote of the people for it, but the legislature had to pass their portions of it. And they passed it, stepped up to the plate, and it was an extraordinary, heavy lift. But they passed it, and then the people of Arkansas passed it with 55 percent of the vote, extension of that half-cent sales tax. And we had some very conservative legislators that said, "That's a tax increase. We're not gonna vote for it." It was clearly an extension of an existing tax, and so that prevailed. But it was—it took a lot of work and leadership because my name's on it. It is the Governor's Highway Plan. It is in the middle of the pandemic. We're tryin' to sell this to the people. And we're—actually did a fly-around news conference across the state during the pandemic marshaling our forces for it. And it paid off.

[01:12:35] JD: And I'm even thinking back, and you've touched on

this—but the legislators, if I remember, were getting a lot of pressure from—in regards to a no-tax pledge that a lot of them had, at some point, signed or promises they at one point made. And so you touch on this. The definition of—is this a continued tax that's already on the books, or is it a new tax? And I remember that being a major issue in the legislature despite the fact that the public in the state, especially when it came down to time to make a decision, were very supportive overall.

AH: They were. We made sure that we had a good plan that we could sell and that all of the elements of the highway plan were poll tested. And we knew that—for example, we did raise the gas tax I think it was three cents, something like that, through the legislative action. But we polled it, and that was the maximum amount, you know, 'cause there were a lot of people advocating for a greater increase. And it was, no, no, we can't do that. It's not gonna—the public would not accept it. And then, you know, we put in some interesting parts to it. But the big part was the extension of the half-cent sales tax. And you had to use the right language to sell it, to make sure it made sense to the public. But it was—the public knew we needed new highways. [01:14:00] And you know, I was on the phone raising money for that campaign. And we raised over a million

dollars to sell it. And it took that kind of effort to win that battle. But it sets Arkansas apart because now, compared to our other states, we have one of the most robust funding programs for our highways. And it was a good team effort to get that done.

[01:14:30] JD: It may be something we've already talked about, but is there an event, an issue, a story, something that, to you, illustrates a particularly successful moment or an accomplishment, somethin' to which you're maybe—one of those things you're most proud of in your eight years as governor.

AH: Well, there's a lot. And of course, what I take the greatest joy in is whenever I know it impacts someone's individual life and makes their life better. And that's what happened with computer science because I can recount so many teachers that moved into teaching a new subject that was important to the students and students that might've been struggling in the classroom, but they embraced computer coding, and it fit them, and they had opportunities because of that. So it changed their life through education. You know, it's about the foster care and the children. Those are things that are so meaningful to me. But we used stories in the highway plan of a mom takin' her children to school and kept hittin' the same pothole, and it would cost them money to repair their car. And it was hard on them

financially. So those kind of human elements make the difference. [01:16:05] When it came to our tax cuts, I knew that we needed to bring entrepreneurs and capital back to Arkansas. And whenever a family came to me and said, "We wanna come back to Arkansas, but you gotta get that tax rate down." And it was at 7 percent at the time. We lowered that tax rate down to 4.9 percent. And it's a very prominent family—they came up to me and said, "Asa, we're all back to Arkansas now." And they were out of state because of low tax rates, and they moved their capital back to Arkansas, their entrepreneurial skills, their capital formation that creates jobs. And you multiply that over and over again with others that come here because of a more competitive tax rate. I know we changed the dynamic of Arkansas.

[01:17:05] JD: I think at one point in your earlier interview segment, you had talked about some of the things that inspired you in politics, but inspired you in conservative politics in particular. And it seems like a lot of your goals and a lot of the accomplishments you made, you know, years later as governor of Arkansas are almost checklist marks of some of the things and some of the philosophies that you've embraced over a public life.

AH: Just on that point, one principal, founding, governing argument that I had from the very beginning or philosophy—I said that I wanted the private sector of our economy to grow faster than the government sector. That is such a simple economic principle. But that guided us. And so you reduce regulation, you reduce state employment by 3,000 workers while I was governor. You grew the private sector, created 100,000 jobs. And I put my energy into it by lowering the tax rate, by recruiting industry, bein' on the phone, and you're able to grow the private sector of the economy. [01:18:21] You asked me about rewarding moments. During the—one of the debates in 2014, you're asked the question—it's a fairly typical question in a debate—"If you're elected governor, what will be the first thing you do on day one?" Well, I'm tryin' to present myself as a jobs governor, so I said, "On day one, I will be on the phone with six CEOs across the country askin' them to do business in Arkansas." And so on day one, when I'm elected, I go in there, and I had our economic developers to present me with a list of six companies that I can call. The first company that I called, the CEO only could speak Japanese. So that call didn't do that well. But the second call that I made that day was to Ron Cohen, who was in New Hampshire. He was a CEO of SIG

Sauer. And I said, "Ron, have you ever thought about doin' business in Arkansas?" He said, "I have not." And I said, "Let me make the case." And I made the case for Arkansas. One year later at the SHOT show in Las Vegas, Ron Cohen announced that they're moving an ammunition-manufacturing facility at Jacksonville, Arkansas. And it was gonna be about 100 jobs. Today it's over 600 jobs that are there. And the best story of that is that Grandeur Fasteners out of Danville—they opened up a facility in Little Rock too—'cause they're part of the supply chain for SIG Sauer. And then up in Northern Arkansas in a very small community, they expanded their facilities because they were supplyin' parts to SIG Sauer. And it really emphasizes how the small communities can benefit when you bring a supply-chain driver like a SIG Sauer in. And so not every city wins a big company, but every small community can benefit from that kind of investment.

[01:20:41] JD: Governor, if you'd had an extra two years or four more years, is there something that you felt if you'd had more time, you would've tried to pursue? Maybe not something that you tried and failed on, but something that, if you'd just had more time, that you would've explored and potentially been able to accomplish.

AH: Well, that's—one, I think eight years as governor is good enough. I'm happy—I'm okay with the term limits of eight years. But there's some new ideas come in. And every day there's more to accomplish. And yes, there's a few things that were—needed to be done. And I think one of 'em is certainly in the area of education. I had, in addition to the computer science initiative in education, I had the RISE, Reading Initiative for Student Excellence, which was phonetics, the science of reading, the culture of reading in the schools, individualized help, makin' sure they can read at grade level in grade three, and helping them when they can't. But COVID really interrupted that and set us back. And so there was more that needed to be done in education. [01:22:02] And one of the things that my successor took on that I advocated for in foundational, you know, was choice of education. So I would've taken on expanding choice in education to a greater extent if I'd've had a third term. One of the things that I think was not fully finished. You know, continuing to be competitive with tax rates. Recruiting industry is where—you're not finished with that. And in Arkansas there's—nothing can replace the governor making the call and makin' the trip and doin' the hard work there. Most important power of a governor is the convening authority of the governor.

Everybody's—nobody turns a governor down if you wanna—you invite them to the Mansion. And so that power of salesmanship makes a difference, and I would've continued that as well.

[01:23:05] JD: Before we round out this segment on your time as governor, is there anything else you can think of that we've not covered before we go into your run for president? Is there anything else that you can think of?

AH: Well, just let me—'cause I have talked a lot about my eight years as governor. But in the first term, I brought computer science to a point of national leadership and recognition. Number one in the nation in computer science. Tax rate went from 7 percent to 4.9 percent, the individual income tax rate. Lowered state employment by 3,000 workers. That's a 14 percent reduction without firing anyone. Transformed state government, created a highway plan, over 100,000 jobs created while I was governor over the eight years, and we were a very conservative state in terms of job creation, reducing regulation, expanding the steel industry in Arkansas, the aero-defense industry in our state, and the tech industry in our state. So th— not a greater honor than being governor of Arkansas for eight years, and I hope that, while the legacy might change by historians, I hope they'll remember those key things that were

done.

[01:24:27] JD: It's a long list of accomplishments. It certainly is. During your time in office, and even, really, predating that, but particularly during your two terms, your eight years in office, we see a lot of political change in the state, but also political change nationally. And once your two terms are up, and you're term limited, as we've discussed, after a brief moment there, you run for the Republican nomination for rep—for president of the United States leading up to 2024. I wonder if you could share with us what inspired that, what inspired you to run, and maybe some observations from, you know, the—a person in the arena who's seeing these changes, these shifts occur in real time.

[01:25:26] AH: Well, of course, I was governor during Trump's— well, actually, President Obama, and then we had four years of Donald Trump, and then we had two years of Joe Biden. So I saw three presidents while I was governor. And you can certainly see a difference in leadership. You know, you had a Republican president giving more authority to the states. You had much more burdensome regulatory authority assumed by the federal government in a Democratic administration. And so I knew that, you know, if we're going to continue to win as a country, you needed to go back to the principles of Ronald

Reagan, a conservative philosophy of governing and running a country, and so it's important for me from that standpoint. But in addition, I think it's important for the President of the United States to reflect the character of a country. And when I saw Donald Trump, I didn't think he reflected the character that I wanted the United States of America, that I'm proud of, to reflect. And that was particularly true whenever he did not participate in the peaceful transfer of power to a succeeding administration. He engaged in denyin' the results of the election but also bringing people to the United States Capitol that resulted on an attack on our United States Capitol and our democracy by people of our country. [01:27:16] And when I saw that, I said, "He should never be president of the United States again." Well, obviously, I was wrong on that 'cause he was elected, but it also—but it motivated me. That's what I had to look at. And I had become a, you know, a national voice to a limited extent as a governor, and I spoke out on my concerns. And it wasn't just the character side of it but it was also—Donald Trump didn't seem to care about the growth of the national debt while he was president. He spent too much money. And he believed in tariffs, which across the board, he fundamentally believes in those, which is not a Republican principal that I've

embraced and fought for with more open trade markets. And so all those reasons and differences—I had to look at it, and the more I talked about it, the more encouragement that I received and the more conviction I had that we needed to have an alternative. Just like I ran against Dale Bumpers back in the [19]80s because I believed Arkansas deserved a choice, I believed that America deserved a choice. And I became one of those.

[01:28:40] JD: If you would, share what it's like to run for President of the United States and maybe parallels, perhaps, between running for a statewide office and running for a—you know, the national office.

AH: Well, beyond being governor, in terms of experiences in life, running for President of the United States was an incredible experience in my life. Very positive about the fact that I did it, even though I was certainly unsuccessful. And the reason is that where you—wherever you travel in America, whether it was California, Iowa, South Carolina, New Hampshire, anywhere, you could see that the people of America cared about our country. And that is just fundamental about democracy. And they might disagree on approach and what needs to be done, but they care. And so that was my overriding lesson from running for president.

But secondly, as to how you compare it, there's nothing that compares to running for president. There's a reason that candidates run two or three times is because it's almost impossible to get right the first time. And nobody's ever had that experience. I mean, you had—you've run as a governor or a senator in one state, and all of a sudden you're runnin' in fifty states. The enormity of that is just extraordinary. And you know, whether it's the scrutiny, whether it is the fundraising pressure that's on you, whether it's you have to be everywhere at the same time—all of those things makes it extraordinary. And there's nothing like it. And it's hard to explain, but whenever you go to Iowa as a candidate for president, even in the early stages of it, and you've got *New York Times* to California to networks following you around, every soundbite that you give really just escalates the pressure every day in that race. [01:30:53] And then you think about the history of it. For somebody who's watched the debates, who's watched the history of presidential campaigns as I have and then to go to Exeter, New Hampshire, and to be in a town hall meeting in Exeter, New Hampshire on the same stage that Abraham Lincoln spoke on in 1860 is just a wild "I'm here at this moment." And then to be in the presidential debate, the primary debate—it was

the largest viewing audience of any of 'em, the first one. Eight of us on the stage, working hard to get there was an extraordinary moment to be able to talk about my values, where I think the country needs to go. And I hope I added to the debate.

[01:31:50] JD: As we've been talking, you know, it's apparent, I think, to anyone who knows your history and has at least a—an even passing knowledge of Arkansas's political history, particularly in the last several decades—if we were to think about Republican Party success, if we were to think about communicating conservative ideals, you are a constant in that conversation. And I wonder if you have any thoughts on where the party and the message have, you know, come from, particularly from your earlier political days, and then to where it is today, good and bad. You know, what are your thoughts, your reflections on that [*AH laughs*] significant time in political history in Arkansas?

AH: Well, it just reflects that politics is a changing environment every day, and there's pendulums that swing back and forth. Arkansas became the last Southern state to become Republican. We'll probably be the last to swing back. But I already see some of the errors that a majority party can make. You know, the

Democratic Party after a hundred and some years loses power because they lost their structure, they lost their commitment to work hard at the polls, they didn't have their talent base over time. But also there was a little bit of arrogance that set in and entitlement. And here, for example, whenever I was chairman of the party in Arkansas, one of the fundamental things that we wanted to change is we wanted to move away from the partisan election of judges. I took a case to the Supreme Court that was political in nature, and they were all Democrats on the Arkansas Supreme Court, elected as Democrats, filed their, you know, pledge as Democrats. I asked them all to recuse themselves, and they did. We won the case. And so that was a fundamental precept of Republican Party in Arkansas was we oughta have non-partisan election of judges. Well, over time, we won that. [AH laughs] And there's non-partisan election of judges. And now you see a movement in the Republican Party that we ought to have partisan election of judges. They oughta run as Republicans or Democrats. We oughta know what they are. [01:34:44] And it's just such irony as to how, when you become the majority party, all of a sudden you want to protect the majority at all costs. And to—and so I think there's some dangers there. You know, from a national perspective—and

politics is really defined from the national politics and the leader of our party. And so the Republican Party today is defined by Donald Trump. It is Donald Trump, and he's changed the party. It's totally different from the Reagan party that we had, the Reagan-Bush party. And it was—it's different than what I fundamentally believed as I joined the party back in the late [19]70s. And I don't see us as committed to free trade, for sure. But abandoning American leadership in the globe, being—saying Russia's a more reliable partner than Ukraine and tryin' to cut a deal with Russia at the expense of Ukraine and Europe is something that Ronald Reagan would be shaking in his boots about. So that's a different Republican Party. Trump has redefined it. History will tell us whether this is good or bad. I think it's terrible right now. And it's not the party that I embraced. And so we need dissident voices in the party today. I just came back from a Principles First Summit where you had leaders that said, "We can do better." And it's not that we're tryin' to undermine the success of our current president or Republican leadership because we want to have agendas accomplished and strength of America demonstrated.

[01:36:51] But when you see us goin' in the wrong direction, then somebody has to sound the alarm. I look at it as goin' back

to my days at Homeland Security. And I get letters today—I had one yesterday from someone from New York that said, "What do you do? What's a conservative supposed to do in this changed Republican Party and the environment that we have today?" And to me the answer is just like you have any impending disaster while I was at Homeland Security or as governor—you first have to mitigate the disaster, and then secondly you gotta prepare for the recovery. So those are two fundamental things that we ought to be doing today. And that is sounding the alarm when we can change the course of the present, but also recognize there's gonna be another debate down the road. Where are we gonna go as a party after the four years of Donald Trump? Are we gonna continue in the same path? Are we going to be a party of a broader majority that's going to, again, reflect a stronger America and an America that leads?

[01:38:10] JD: Switching gears just a bit, I'd like to ask you to reflect on two types of accomplishments. You know, and one I probably already know the answer, but we always like to ask about family. So looking back on your political career and your life as it continues today, you know, what are some things about your personal life which you're proud of? And then I'll ask a similar question about your public life.

AH: Well, in terms of family, I have a bride that has put up with my politics, my profession, my engagements for fifty-one years. And on our fiftieth wedding anniversary, I'm in Iowa campaigning and tryin' to get on the debate stage. And I call Susan up and say, "Honey, I can't make it home for our fiftieth wedding anniversary." [*Laughs*] And she said, "Asa, we're in this together. We wanna make sure you get on the debate stage, so you do what you need to do to get on that debate stage." [*Laughs*] And that's the kind of love and support that she's given me. She's been just, you know, part of everything in my life. And as governor, of course, she had a wonderful role as first lady that accomplished a great deal that will go down in history as well. [01:39:50] And so I'm very proud of her and our relationship. And win or lose that she's right there with me. And the same thing can be said for my four children. And it's great. We have a diversity of thought in my family. We th—we look at politics a little bit differently, some of 'em, but very close knit and love each one of 'em. And they have shown their devotion to me, you know, through thick and thin. But we also—we've just had a lot of fun along the way. You know, great stories about my adventures in camping and—and you know, when I've been in congress, I wanted to make sure I got to

spend special time with 'em, so I got to take one of my sons to a baseball tour, goin' to Milwaukee Stadium, Old Milwaukee Stadium, and a Chicago White Sox—Chicago Cubs game. And then goin' to Alaska with another son that, you know, got to do backpacking there in Alaska, climbing fourteeners with 'im. And special things. My daughter, Sarah, she was so integral as a part of my campaign, but also as the first daughter, she had a special place at the Mansion and working with us as governor. And then she—and her husband, Dave, was the co-chairman of my—both inaugurals. Put on the best party ever. And she and I have had really a special time. [01:41:32] As a lawyer, her first job in high school was workin' in my law office as a paralegal. And she's in high school, mind you. But we tell great stories because when I tried a case, she'd go over, and she would sit as co-council with me. [*Laughs*] The judge gave permission for her to sit in front of the bar. And she would help me pick a jury. And she always reminds me that she'd turn to me, and she'd say, "Dad, that one lady on the jury really doesn't like you." [*JD laughs*] And I say, "Oh, Sarah, she does, too. She does, too." And so I kept her on the jury. And sure enough, she's the only one that voted against me.

JD: Sarah's a quick read. [*Laughter*]

AH: So you—great memories, you know, of special times with each of 'em. And now I get to practice law with my oldest son. And so my family's very, very important to me and always has been. And they've put up with a lot of difficulty, but also public scrutiny. And the scrutiny comes with a price. And I ask for it. They don't. And that's a little bit harder.

[01:42:49] JD: Publicly—you've lived, you know, as you've just indicated, a very public life, a life devoted to public service. Even today in public—in private practice, you're still engaged in that vein of American society. And I wonder, you know, of all of the accolades, of all the accomplishments and victories, you know, is there something that stands out in your political career that comes to mind?

AH: There's many things. I mean, everything from US Attorney and the puttin' on a bulletproof vest to the ultimate prosecution of them obviously is something that stood out early in my career. My time in Congress in the Bush administration—highlights for me. Helping our country through a very difficult time after 9/11, after the 9/11 attack. And then, you know, as governor, helpin' us through a pandemic that made people hurt. And a governor standing with them and helping and consoling and trying to do the right thing and people seeing that. Those are the things that

stand out to me and—because they impact people individually as well as collectively. And that's why I'm in public service. If I miss anything, it's because I don't get out with people every day and have the joy of interaction and touching their life. I mean, today I'm teaching at law school, and so many times a law student will pop up with a picture and say, "Oh, this is where I was in the Mansion," and it's a picture that we took four years ago." Or they say, "You're the reason I'm goin' to law school. You encouraged me." Or, "You're the reason I'm goin' into public service." That's what stands out to me and brings great joy. And that's what public service is about at whatever level you are.

[01:45:12] JD: I guess the last question I have for you—and then we can—if there's anything else you'd like to add. And this is probably more about your public life as well, your political legacy, your public legacy of service. As you're—look back, how do you wanna be remembered?

AH: Well, ego [*laughs*] tells me I want to be remembered as a transformational governor, which is—and I do believe there's merit there, that it was transformational from Democratic rule to a new philosophy of governing, again, private-sector growth, slower government growth, growth of the state of Arkansas. I

do believe there's a transformational aspect to the governorship that I would like the history to record. [01:46:12] I also hope that history just says I was a reliable, trustworthy leader that cared. And I look back at—through history and governors that made wrong decisions that were on the wrong side of history—I hope that whenever we look at my time in public service that I was on the right side of important issues that impact fairness and justice and rule of law and love for people. And you can't say that about everyone. And you know, your perspectives change, so I hope history remembers me in that way.

[01:47:07] And whenever you have that motivation and hope, it does—you know, sometimes you're alone. And I remember the—what William Manchester's book on Winston Churchill. He had multiple volumes, and one of his volumes was the *Alone* years. And you know, you look back on the history of my political engagement, you had alone years, and you had years that you were in the majority. And even in the majority, you have times when you stand alone. And I think those are the years that stand out even more in terms of history.

[01:47:52] JD: Is there anything we've neglected?

AH: Nah, I don't—no, I—that—I think that's good. [Laughs] You did a nice job. You bring it out.

JD: Well, Asa Hutchinson, on behalf of the David and Barbara Pryor Center for Arkansas Oral and Visual History, I wanna thank you again for sharing your unique Arkansas story with us.

AH: Well, thank you. It's been an honor, and it's nice to reflect.

JD: Thank you. All right.

[End of interview 01:48:23]