Drew Edmondson

16th Attorney General of Oklahoma

Chapter 1 – Introduction

Announcer: Drew Edmondson is the son of former U.S. Congressman Ed Edmondson and June Edmondson. He is also a nephew of former Governor J. Howard Edmondson. His brother, James Edmondson, is a justice of the Oklahoma Supreme Court.

Drew was the Oklahoma Attorney General from 1995 to 2011. His 58 opinions defending the Open Meeting and Open Records Acts strengthened citizen access to government. He sued the tobacco industry, winning a national settlement resulting in more than a billion dollars invested in Oklahoma's healthcare and Drew successfully filed suit against a dozen poultry companies for polluting the Illinois River.

His prior public service included the U.S. Navy, State Representative, and District Attorney. He has received many honors including induction to the Oklahoma Hall of Fame.

In his oral history interview, Drew talks about his political family, people he prosecuted in Muskogee as District Attorney, and several campaigns for office on the podcast and website VoicesOfOklahoma.com.

Chapter 2 – 9:10
Parental Influence

John Erling (JE): My name is John Erling, and today's date is July 17, 2024. So, Drew, would you state your full name, please?

Drew Edmondson (DE): William Andrew Edmondson.

JE: And we are recording this interview in the Oklahoma History Center in Oklahoma City. Your birth date?

DE: October 12, 1946.

JE: And your present age?

DE: 77.

JE: I'm interested in names. How do we end up calling you Drew? I suppose from Andrew, but it could have been Andy too.

DE: I thought you were checking to see if I was oriented times three. I'm not sure why I wasn't Bill. Could have been, when my mom and dad got married in the Navy. Mom was a wave and Dad was in the Navy. They were in San Diego, and they were real close to Andrew Wilcoxson. Andrew Wilcoxson from Muskogee was a classmate of my dad's and was best man at that wedding. But they didn't call me Andrew, they called me Drew. They named me Andrew, but they called me Drew. They lived on our street, 14th Street in Muskogee. They were Presbyterians where we went to church. We grew up with them. The first two born into my family were James, Jim, and Andrew Drew, and Andy's first two kids were Drew and Jim.

JE: (Laughing) That's too confusing for me.

DE: It confused most people.

JE: Where were you born?

DE: I was born in Washington, DC, Sibley Memorial Hospital, while my dad was in law school. I was always quick to point that out. I was not born into a congressman's family. He was a struggling veteran going to law school at Georgetown. As soon as he graduated, we all moved back to Muskogee.

JE: We'll talk about him, but let's talk about your mother. Your mother's name, maiden name, where she grew up.

DE: Her name was June Maureen Pilley, P-I-L-L-E-Y. She was born in Nebraska, but when she joined the waves, she was in Kansas City, was an actress, and stage actress in Kansas City. So she gave up show business to defend the country.

JE: That was honorable.

DE: And joined the waves.

JE: OK. Her personality, how would you describe her?

DE: She was pretty outgoing. She was very active in the little theater in Muskogee because of her own background and civic clubs in Muskogee. She campaigned with Dad, but it was not her favorite thing to do. So when Dad quit running for things, I think she breathed a sigh of relief that she didn't have to do that anymore. Been to a lot of bean dinners.

JE: Sure. Any qualities you think you may have drawn from her?

DE: I guess politics is another form of acting. And I did a lot of little theater work in Muskogee because of her. And it was interesting because, you know, she had a high school degree but never went to college. And, you know, Baycomb College was right there and Northeastern opened a branch in Muskogee, and we encouraged her on occasion to go take some courses. She took an art course from Dick West at Baycomb, but that's about as far as that went. But she was the most well-read person that I knew.

JE: Probably taught you to become a reader. I suspect you're a reader.

DE: Yes, she did -- and very strong on Shakespeare. We learned a lot about Shakespeare's plays just at home. There was a Shakespeare Club in Muskogee. And she was in it.

JE: Look at the education you were getting at home already, not necessarily from school.

DE: We were very fortunate that next to our dinner table was a set of Encyclopedia Britannica and a set of World Book, and always dictionaries. We didn't wonder about a question. We'd look it up.

JE: (Laughing) And she'd probably tell you to do that, "Look it up."

DE: Right, and I would say, "How can I look it up if I can't spell it?"

JE: Right. Then your father's name?

DE: Originally Edmond Augustus Edmondson Junior. He changed it legally to Ed.

JE: What a name that is, huh? Edmond Augustus Edmondson.

DE: Yes, Junior. His father was Edmond Augustus. And trace that back at least as far as the 1860s, Andrew Jackson Edmondson had two sons, Edmond Augustus and James Howard in the 1860s.

JE: Wow, yeah. But then his father, your grandfather, was he a Muskogee County commissioner?

DE: Yes, he was.

JE: So that shows how this service to country and state goes way back in your family.

DE: And before and after being county commissioner, he was one of those people that politicians needed to go see, you know. And they're all over the state, people that if you're running for office, they'd say, "Go see so-and-so." He was, I guess you could call him a ward healer. He was very interested in politics. He got an invitation to, I think it was for Harry Truman coming to Oklahoma City, that was addressed to E.A. Edmondson. At that time, E.A., my grandfather, had already passed, but Dad was E.A. also, and he took that invitation and went to the meeting. He found out later that he was supposed to bring $1,000, but he didn't know that at the time.

JE: But then he has a brother by the name of J. Howard Edmondson.

DE: Yes.

JE: Your uncle.

DE: That's correct, younger brother.

JE: J. stood for James.

DE: James Howard.

JE: Right. And then we can talk about him, but he was Oklahoma governor and U.S. senator.

DE: Elected in the Prairie Fire campaign of 1958, the big red E.

JE: All right, but then your father, he worked as a journalist.

DE: He really liked journalism. When he was first out of Congress, it would have been 1972, he wrote a column, "An Oklahoman Looks at Washington," sent it around, and then he asked if any of the newspapers that he'd been

sending it to would like to pick it up. And I don't think he had very many takers on it when they had to pay money for the column. They enjoyed printing it when he was sending it for free. But he admired journalists.

JE: And he worked for the Muskogee paper, The Muskogee Phoenix, I guess?

DE: That would be maybe before my time.

JE: And United Press International, as a matter of fact, but we should also say that he was a correspondent for several Oklahoma newspapers when he was in Washington from 1946 to 1947.

DE: That was when he was in law school. He was in the Navy and he was also in the FBI all during that time period.

JE: Special agent, yes, and became a lieutenant in the U.S. Navy serving in the Pacific, was also in the U.S. Naval Reserve, 1946 to 1970. What a background your father had.

DE: And he kind of led us all into the Navy. My brother Jim and I also served and we were both Navy.

JE: Because of your father.

DE: Father and mother.

JE: You were destined to be in both Navy and politics. I would imagine all they would talk about at the dinner table would be politics, or mostly?

DE: Politics was certainly open for discussion at the dinner table, but we had a wide range of subjects at the dinner table, including the proverbial question, "What did you learn in school today?" And we talked about our schoolwork and things like that, and things that are happening in the world and things that are happening in the country, not so much the next race, how's it going, that kind of stuff. It was more the issues involved in politics than it was the mechanics of politics itself.

JE: Quite the education you were getting there as well.

Chapter 3 – 9:45
No Room On The Plane

John Erling (JE): But I like the story about your uncle, J. Howard Edmondson. Let's take just a minute to talk about prohibition and his role in prohibition, and maybe you can lead me on that. Talk about prohibition and what he did to actually do away with prohibition in our state.

Drew Edmondson (DE): He tried to make it clear during the 1958 campaign—keep in mind I was 12 at the time, so this is not a professional evaluation of the campaign, this is just what I observed. He tried to make it clear that what he advocated was allowing the people of the state of Oklahoma to vote on it. He tried to avoid being labeled as either a prohibitionist or someone in favor of repeal. He was in favor of repeal, but that isn't how he wanted to be characterized. He wanted to be characterized as "the people have a right to vote on it." That was a lesson he learned in 1950 in a state rep race in Muskogee, where he lost. Dad was county attorney and Howard was running for the legislature, and he got beat by a fellow named Bill Hayworth. The Sunday before the election, churches all over town were leafleted with flyers saying that Howard was for repeal of prohibition, and he thinks that cost him some votes. That is how J. Howard ended up in Tulsa. After that race, he moved to Tulsa and became an assistant county attorney and ultimately county attorney and governor. But he was cautious of that subject in the governor's race because he got bit by it in Muskogee in a state rep race. So he tried to make it clear he was for the people voting, but he engineered that vote by dispatching Joe Cannon, later a district judge in Oklahoma County, and at that time his head of the Department of Public Safety, to dry up every bootlegger and every private club speakeasy in Oklahoma. Joe worked the highway patrol in doing that, stopping people running whiskey into the state and closing down private clubs and things like that. The Will Rogers admonition was that Oklahoma would vote dry as long as the Baptists could stagger to the polls. Well, they voted to repeal when they could no longer get their whiskey illegally.

JE: In the days of prohibition, as I understand, they were making it, and then of course the criminal type got into it and all that happened simply because

we told people, "You can't drink," "Thou shalt not drink," and it backfired in their face.

DE: Certainly since biblical times, there are stories about drinking.

JE: Right.

DE: Jesus's first miracle was at the direction of his mother, changing water to wine.

JE: Right.

DE: It's a great Mother's Day story, by the way.

JE: Yes. But J. Howard, your uncle, was the youngest governor in the history of the state at 33 years old. Amazing, and he still holds that record.

DE: I thought David Boren might have gotten close to him, but I'm not challenging that. I think that's probably true.

JE: Right. Then ultimately, we should talk about how he became Senator J. Howard. How did he become senator?

DE: Howard was down at the Orange Bowl watching Oklahoma play when Robert S. Kerr died New Year's Day, it would have been 1963. George Nigh was still in Oklahoma, so he was governor. It's kind of a curious legal point—the lieutenant governor, when the governor's out of state, is not acting governor; he is governor. The Constitution says the powers of the office devolve upon the lieutenant governor. So Howard called George and said, "George, you're not gonna do anything exciting while I'm gone, are you?" But he was getting a lot of input from powerful legislators on who he could name. But George stayed loyal to Howard and held off, and they discussed it. Again, these are hearing conversations around the house—that George had offered the senatorship to Bob Kerr's widow on the assumption that she probably would not run again, and he offered it to Bob Junior on the condition that he not run again, and that was unacceptable to the Kerrs. So then he arranged with the lieutenant governor that Howard would resign, George would become governor, and George would appoint Howard to the United States Senate, and that's what got done.

JE: Within a very short period of time, that manipulating went on.

DE: It happened pretty quickly once Howard got back to the state. It was a little testy. My goodness, I'd never thought about what would have happened—George wanted to go to the Orange Bowl, and there wasn't room for him on the plane, but if George had gone also, then either the Speaker of the House or the President of the Senate would have been the acting governor, and that might have been a really different outcome than what actually happened.

JE: Just because there wasn't room on the plane.

DE: There wasn't room on the plane.

JE: There's a book title there, I think. Wow, that's interesting. Let's see, how many terms did your uncle serve?

DE: He served two years. In the 1964 primary, that's when Fred Harris came out of Southwestern Oklahoma, short grass country, with the full support of the Kerr family and beat Howard in the primary. Howard had done an awful lot as governor that to this day is a monument to his service, but he did some things—for instance, the central purchasing measure that was adopted originally applied to county purchasing as well as state purchasing. County commissioners just rose up in one voice saying, "We aren't gonna have it," and central purchasing was then amended to apply only to state purchasing. About 200-some-odd county commissioners probably would not have been indicted and prosecuted if central purchasing had been applied to both state and county purchasing at the time, but they were mad. He started right off alienating, running against the old guard. That includes the legislature, so legislators all over Oklahoma, if they weren't Howard's people, they were vehemently anti-Howard, so it was no surprise that he lost that primary. Fred Harris later became a very good friend of my father and myself both, but we noted in that campaign that Fred's campaign colors were blue and yellow, the same colors as Kerr McGee. Fred's opponent that November was Bud Wilkinson, and Bud talked about the decline of America and the decline of the Roman Empire. I don't know if Howard was the first to say it, but he remarked that Rome began to decline when they started electing gladiators to the Senate. Bud Wilkinson would not have lost any race for any office, except in 1964 when Lyndon Johnson was carrying the state overwhelmingly against Barry Goldwater. The Johnson landslide really helped Fred win that race.

JE: As I recall—in fact, I interviewed the son of Bud Wilkinson, and I don't know if we discussed how Bud just didn't seem to want to talk football. He didn't want to talk about that. He wanted to talk about the Roman Empire, so he wasn't relating to them when he could easily have done that. But obviously Fred won. That was a surprise—to beat your uncle and to beat Bud as well, for a man who wasn't necessarily known statewide.

DE: Fred was a great speaker.

JE: Yeah.

Chapter 4 – 5:50
Political Legacy

John Erling (JE): So then your siblings—have we mentioned them yet? Your siblings are?

Drew Edmondson (DE): James Edmond Edmondson, who's currently on the state Supreme Court. We had a younger brother, John Martin Edmondson, that went by Tad. He died in a motorcycle accident in 1972. Sister June Ellen Edmondson, now Angle for a last name, is living in Rio Rancho, which is a suburb of Albuquerque, New Mexico. And Brian Thomas Edmondson is an MSW social worker, family therapist, here in Oklahoma City.

JE: There isn't another family in Oklahoma who's served as long as your family, nor has the legacy of government service. That's not just a compliment, that's a fact. Isn't that true?

DE: As far as I know.

JE: You're kind of like the Kennedy family to Oklahoma, the Edmondson family.

DE: I would rather be likened to them than the Long family in Louisiana, with a similar history.

JE: You talk about the campaigns and your family gatherings and so forth. Are there some stories about your father and his brother J. Howard and how they campaigned? Wasn't there a car that they used?

DE: A 1949 Ford, four-door, black, which my brother Jim and I drove to high school in the 1960s. It was traded back and forth between Howard and Ed depending on who was having a race that year. It was supposed to be lucky until it wasn't anymore. In the '72 race that my dad lost for the U.S. Senate—it was the first race that he'd ever lost, after two terms as county attorney and ten terms in the U.S. Congress. Then he turned around and lost again in '74 by a very narrow margin for the U.S. Senate. At that point, the '49 Ford was gathering weeds, parked in the alley behind our house, and I'm not sure any of the other kids wanted to drive it to school or anywhere else for that matter. It was a little dated by then, but it was considered lucky. The people who were running against J. Howard for governor in 1958 made a strategic error in not making sure that my dad had a Democratic Party opponent that year. He was free to help Howard, and a lot of the really good ideas for that campaign were at least shared or came from Ed. It was a mistake that Bill Atkinson was in that race—he had the money to fund his own race and somebody running for Congress in the 2nd District, he could have done it. Others as well, and they just missed it. Howard had probably the best campaign manager that anybody's ever had. Dad was going to ask for a return of that favor in 1972. Howard was managing Ed's campaign until Howard died of a heart attack in his 40s before that race ever happened in 1971. Dad lost his campaign manager. Then in April of '72, he lost his son in that motorcycle accident. So, just two body blows took the wind out of his sails. But the big factor in '72 was Nixon-McGovern. Nixon was carrying the state with 75% against McGovern. The flip side of the benefit Fred had with Lyndon Johnson at the head of the ticket against Goldwater reversed in '72, and we were on the 25% side of that presidential race.

JE: Had politics and the prospect of serving bitten you when you were doing all that? "This is fun, and I want to get into it myself."

DE: I think I grew up with an interest in politics. I was never analytical about it. I never thought about, "What can I do to make a better politician or run a better race down the road?" It just kinda happened. But of the five kids in the family, I was the one more than any of my siblings who wanted to tag along to the bean dinners and the rallies and stuff like that. I enjoyed those events, which may be a little nerdy and a little weird, but I did enjoy it. I enjoyed shaking hands and meeting people and hearing my dad speak.

JE: You were 8, 9, 10, 12 years old when doing that?

DE: Yeah.

Chapter 5 – 10:00
Education

John Erling (JE): So your education—your grade school, then, in Muskogee?

Drew Edmondson (DE): We went back and forth. We split semesters between DC and Muskogee. Anytime we were not in DC, we were in the public schools in Muskogee, and we were always in the public schools in the DC area. But Dad split his time; he was running every two years, which means the campaigning never stops, really. You're either fundraising or you're going to events, and he would split semesters—they weren't semesters to him, they were just parts of the year. He would go to DC in the fall, and then when the Congress recessed or adjourned, he'd bring everybody home. We would have the next semester in Muskogee, with one proviso: we knew that we could have our senior year of high school unbroken. We had to pick whether to do Muskogee or DC, and my brother Jim picked Muskogee, which meant I got my junior year unbroken and then I picked Muskogee. So I got my last two and a half years at Muskogee Central, which I really appreciated—that was a lot of fun. I was involved in debate, and it just wasn't as big in the Virginia, Maryland, and DC schools as it was in Oklahoma.

JE: How did that affect you, bouncing back between these two districts in school? Did it bother you, or did you pick right up on it?

DE: There again, it's like having poor vision—that's just what we do. It never occurred to me that we could be doing something else. It never occurred to me that it was unusual. The one drawback was, until my senior year of high school, I was 4'11". All the way through junior high and high school, I was 4'11", so every new school there had to be a fight. When somebody called me "Shorty" or something like that, there'd be a fight so they wouldn't call me that anymore.

JE: So you were up for the fight.

DE: I was up for the fight—not always successful, but my dad told me early on, "If a bully's picking on you, get in one good hit. He'll beat you up after that, but he won't ever beat you up again if you get in one good hit."

JE: So when did you start growing?

DE: That summer between my senior year of high school and my freshman year of college.

JE: So people are gonna wonder how tall you are now.

DE: Oh, about 5'7", 5'8".

JE: Then in high school, you were in debates, and you enjoyed that public speaking?

DE: Very much enjoyed debate—the debate tournaments. It was more generally forensic back then, so if you were in debate, you also did extemporaneous speaking, original oration, and sometimes if you wanted to compete for sweepstakes, you would do poetry or humorous reading or dramatic readings just to get points towards sweepstakes. But when I got into college, it was just debate, and we let what we referred to as the "drama students" do the other stuff.

JE: Drama.

DE: Yeah, we called them that.

JE: I got it, right. And the college?

DE: Northeastern State, and I was there on scholarship as a debater. It was what they referred to as a work scholarship, where the work was the research. Researching the topic was the work part of the work scholarship, and it paid half my tuition and room and board my freshman, sophomore, and junior year, and full tuition and room and board my senior year.

JE: You must have been quite a debater in high school, then, for it to come to the attention of the school.

DE: We went to some good tournaments and brought some gold-colored trophies home. They weren't gold by any stretch. And Northeastern, notwithstanding the fact that it was a small college over in Tahlequah, at the time we were there had more earned invitations to the national debate

tournament than any other school in the nation, including Harvard, Yale, Georgetown, Northwestern, or any of the California schools.

JE: David Boren talks about debating as well, except he signed up for debate, and he could not get himself to stand up in front of the students. His professor said, "If you don't stand up and start talking, you're gonna flunk this." He was extremely shy—very shy—and you apparently were not.

DE: Not when it came to that activity. And by the way, Seminole had a storied record in debate where David Boren grew up. It was a powerhouse. Sand Springs was not so much, nor Oklahoma City and Tulsa, strangely.

JE: And both of you turned out to be good public speakers. When did you meet your wife Linda?

DE: The first time I met Linda was in DC. She was coming up to see some of her girlfriends—she was at OU, I was at Northeastern, but we were all in DC that summer. The person she was pinned to at the time was working for my dad, and I was working on the Hill as well, and we actually double-dated. But she wasn't my date. I had another date, and the four of us went out and did something. She came over to the house—my mother told John, the person she was pinned to at the time, to bring his girlfriend over, and she'd fix chicken dinner, which she did. Linda said she was a little bit awestruck going to dinner at a congressman's home until she saw him rolling around on the floor with his youngest son. Kind of humanized him in her eyes.

JE: That's how you met her?

DE: Yeah, they came over for chicken dinner. That was it. She went back to Oklahoma. I thought she was a very attractive young lady, but she was spoken for. Later that year, I was down at OU for a debate tournament, and I'm going up the Union steps to see a friend of mine, Bob White—Robert White—who was on student council. I was going up to the student government office in the Union, and she's coming down the stairs. She'd just been to see Robert White, and we ran into each other on the stairway, renewed our acquaintance, and decided to go out that night, another double date with Robert and his—Linda was a Pi Phi, and Robert was dating a Pi Phi. So Robert and I and the two Pi Phis went out that night. The next day, out in front of the Town Tavern on Campus Corner, I asked

her when we were getting married. And her response was, "Not anytime soon."

JE: Yeah. Well, you were pretty confident of yourself, weren't you?

DE: And we did get married the following spring, in 1967.

JE: I see she came from Fargo, Oklahoma?

DE: Well, yes, only more accurately near Fargo, Oklahoma. Went to school in Fargo, but their farm was a couple of miles out of town.

JE: The name jumps out to me because I'm from North Dakota, and there's Fargo, North Dakota, where I worked, and north of there. I didn't even know we had a Fargo. Where is Fargo, Oklahoma?

DE: Ellis County. We were on a trip during COVID because you couldn't do anything else, so we did a lot of driving around the country for a year or so, and we were up in the northern part of Michigan—where Anatomy of a Murder is set, by the way—and decided North Dakota was my 50th state. I'd never been to North Dakota, and she'd never been to Fargo, North Dakota, so we just cruised on across there, spent the night in Fargo, crossed North Dakota off my list, and we got to see Fargo. By the way, for the listening audience, if you drive east across the Oklahoma Panhandle and fall into the state of Oklahoma, you're in Ellis County. The county seat is Arnett. The medical facility is in Shattuck. The railroad and granary silos are in Fargo. The swimming pool's in Gage. She was born in Shattuck. Everybody in Ellis County was either born at home or in Shattuck.

Chapter 6 – 6:45
Navy

John Erling (JE): Out of college, were you a teacher for a while before the Navy? Did you teach at all?

Drew Edmondson (DE): I taught after the Navy.

JE: So then out of college, that's when you went into the Navy in '68?

DE: Yes. I actually signed up right after the Tet Offensive in February of '68, and they had like a 120-day deferral so I could finish school, which I did. Then I went into boot camp after I graduated.

JE: You did a year of duty during the Vietnam War?

DE: Yes.

JE: What did you do? What were you?

DE: First place, I volunteered for that—went to Vietnam. I had requested—talking about being young and dumb—I had requested either swift boats or PBRs. The Swifts went up and down the coast of Vietnam, PBRs went up and down the rivers. I was first assigned to a joint command office that I never got to because, while I was—it kind of felt otherworldly—we flew over on a commercial jet. Everybody was military, but it was like Pan Am. It wasn't a cargo ship or an ocean liner. We flew over, got off the plane at Tan Son Nhut Air Base, and I was keeping my head down because I thought I was going to get shot just going from the plane to the hangar. Then we were moved downtown to a temporary barracks. Everything—the walkways—was sandbagged on both sides, and you walked along the sandbags to go to the mess hall or do whatever, waiting for where I was going to be assigned.

The original orders, like I say, were for some international joint command, but that got switched, and I went to MACV, Military Assistance Command Vietnam, and went to work for the Secretary to the Joint Staff—SJS MACV. What we did in our little unit was prepare message traffic books for the Joint General Staff twice a day, once in the morning and once in the evening. You worked shifts and took turns—day shift half the time and night shift half the time. These were top secret, secret, and confidential message traffic that the Joint General Staff wanted to review either at the end of the day or when they first got up in the morning. We would prepare the message books, and then a full-bird colonel would come in and review them before they went to the generals. Five books: four to the Joint General Staff, and when I first got over there, it was Creighton Abrams. It was either Abrams first or Westmoreland first—I served under both of them while they were over there. But the fifth book went to a fellow named William Colby, who was officed at the embassy, and William Colby in later years became the Director of the CIA. So he was CIA, working out of

the embassy.

We were issued an M16 and clips, which I kept in my locker in the barracks, but when we took a vehicle into town to deliver the top secret messages to the CIA operative working out of the embassy, they issued us a .45 and a clip. And they told us, "Now don't put the clip in until you get into trouble." If you get into trouble and put the clip in the gun—well, every one of us who worked there, that clip went in the gun when we walked out the door because we figured we were in trouble when we walked out the door. But that was, for the most part, uneventful. We just drove down to the embassy, went in and delivered it, and headed back. That's what we did.

JE: So you saw top secret material a lot. And how long a period of time—was that a year?

DE: Well, it was supposed to be a year. By the time I got done, they were cutting the tours down, and it ended up being just over 11 months.

JE: How did that information come to your attention? It was coming to you, and you were writing it out in these books. Where did it come from?

DE: We were looking at all of them, determining which ones the Joint General Staff would be most interested in. Of course, top secret and secret were pretty automatic. Confidential, not so much. A lot of incident reports—somebody jumping off a truck and catching their ring on something and losing a finger, things like that. Those just made the book thicker, and it's not something that was likely to be of major interest.

JE: So being privy to that information—did things happen as a result of that information? You knew ahead of time something was going to happen?

DE: Most of them were things that had happened. They weren't strategic plans. They were incidents, skirmishes, body count-type information, things of that nature.

JE: So then after your tour of duty there—by the way, why did you volunteer for Vietnam? You probably could have been sent to an easier place.

DE: Well, I've wondered about that before, and I think part of it is I felt like I missed most of the Civil Rights Movement—the Freedom Riders, the people who were registering people to vote, that kind of activity—because

I just wasn't old enough. And this was the next biggest thing that was happening, and I didn't want to miss out on it.

JE: Wow. That's admirable. Absolutely admirable.

DE: Well, it may be a little nutty, but—

JE: No, no, no, no. That was service. Service is never nutty.

Chapter 7 – 5:55
Dad's Senate Campaign

John Erling (JE): So out of the Navy, then what do you do?

Drew Edmondson (DE): Well, the '72 Senate campaign was going on. I went in the Navy in '68, and my tour of duty was '71 to '72. Linda and I, by the way, communicated a lot. There were no cell phones, and you had to go through the Red Cross to make a phone call, so it was all mail back and forth. And our letters were totally full of Dad's Senate race. That's about all we talked about—what's going on, who's doing this, who's doing that.

JE: You still have all those letters?

DE: Yes.

JE: Wow, that's a piece of history.

DE: Pretty limited view, but yes. So I went back and went to work on the Senate campaign for my dad.

JE: Your dad, right.

DE: To the consternation of my wife, who'd been working on that campaign the whole time I was gone. That's not true—she was working for a while for David Hall. Joe Carter and Ed Hardy were his communications people, and she was working in that office. But the day that Dad announced for the Senate in '72—and keep in mind this is while Fred Harris was still the senator—she could not work there anymore. She was invited to go work on the Senate campaign, which she did. And I think she enjoyed that as much or more. But my story is that I come into the office—we shared a desk. It

had two sides, but I grabbed the phone and moved it over to my side of the desk, and I'm not sure, 50 years later, that she's forgiven me yet for taking her phone.

JE: OK, then review again—that race was your father running for Senate against?

DE: After 20 years in the House, he ran for the Senate against Dewey Bartlett.

JE: Dewey Bartlett.

DE: Dewey Bartlett, who David Hall had defeated for governor. So Bartlett turns around and runs for the Senate. That was the McGovern year. I had a cousin down in Lawton who would not work in the Democratic headquarters because it had McGovern material in it.

JE: Oh wow.

DE: Lawton is a little different because it's got Fort Sill and everything else, but that's how deep the divisions were on the McGovern race. Anyway, Dad lost that Senate race that year by about 35,000 votes to Dewey Bartlett. And the second one, against Henry Bellmon in '74, was a lot closer and resulted in a challenge to the result because the Tulsa voting machines were not programmed to allow a straight-party vote. State law said you had to provide for a straight-party vote. That was the basis of the challenge, but it was unsuccessful in the courts in Oklahoma. We took the challenge to the Senate. It was unsuccessful there also.

JE: I've interviewed Henry Bellmon, and he talks about that. He was in Washington and could not be seated until that was resolved. He kind of had some angst about that. But technically that was correct, wasn't it?

DE: It was treated that way. I believe the Senate was in Democratic hands, but I don't think a simple majority did it. I think it took a two-thirds vote because it was dealing with an incumbent senator. Even though he hadn't been reseated, he was still an incumbent senator.

JE: Bellmon was.

DE: Yeah.

JE: Henry Bellmon became the first Republican governor, and that was—

DE: '62.

JE: And then the state became Republican ever since.

DE: Pretty much.

JE: It's hard to believe. You might tell people how the Democrats ran this state all those years. It was just as much as the Republicans are running it now. It's just a flip. Would you agree?

DE: I would agree. When I made my first statewide race in—whatever that was—1994, we'd only elected one Republican AG, G.T. Blankenship. I had a busy primary—I had two opponents. One was the immediate past president of the Oklahoma District Attorneys Association, Fred Collins from down in Ardmore, and then a trial lawyer from Tulsa named John Nix. When I got past them, I almost relaxed. You never relax in politics, but I felt pretty comfortable that we'd win the thing. But '94 was Newt Gingrich's Contract with America. And they won seats in Oklahoma that they'd never won before. They'd never elected a Republican lieutenant governor, or a Republican insurance commissioner, labor commissioner—and they won all those races. I watched the early returns and knew, within 30 minutes of the polls closing, that this was going to be a long night.

Chapter 8 – 7:40
Book ‘em Murder One

John Erling (JE): So let's move on here. You graduated from the University of Tulsa Law School, then you were back in Muskogee—Muskogee County District Attorney's office—as an intern. D.A. Mike Turpen steps down to run for Attorney General then?

Drew Edmondson (DE): Yeah, I encouraged him. I was back in the office at that time as chief prosecutor, and he had thought about running for Attorney General. I gave him a coffee mug once with a big boot on it that said "Think Big," and gave it to him. He made the race successfully, and then I ran to take his place as D.A.

JE: That was in '82. You were re-elected without opposition in '86 and '90?

DE: That's correct.

JE: What type of cases do you think you recall that you prosecuted?

DE: Well, there was a big one. The month that I went in as chief prosecutor, and Mike was out running for Attorney General, a fellow named William Thomas Cartwright went into a house north of town and killed Hugh Riddle with a shotgun blast and then almost succeeded in killing his wife. He shot her—she ended up losing a leg from that wound—and he cut her throat and stabbed her in the abdomen. But she lived and testified against him. I took Cartwright into custody. He got away from the house that night and was on the lam for two days. On the third day, Linda got a call from Dovey Fields, Cartwright's sister, who said, "If Drew will come to the house alone and unarmed, I'll tell him where my brother is."

Well, I was over at a police lieutenant's house named Jay Clinton, shooting pool. Linda called—a good lesson to everybody: if you're going to be out that late, tell your wife the truth about where you're going to be, because you may get a phone call. She called and said she'd gotten this call from Dovey Fields. I said, "OK," and went over there. Jay followed me at a distance. I had a .38, but I left it in the car and went into the house. When I walked in the front door, he was sitting on the couch. I said, "Are you Tommy Cartwright?" and he said, "Yes." I said, "You're going to have to come with me." I took him out to my car and drove him down to the police station. Clinton followed me. When we got close to the station, he passed me so he went in first. Then Cartwright and I went in. I took him up—just like Hawaii Five-0—I said, "Booking, murder one," and then went out in the hall all by myself and went, "Yes."

JE: Did he talk to you when you were in the car?

DE: No, he didn't say anything. He did later on that night. My investigator—and I say "my," I wasn't D.A. yet, I was still just chief prosecutor—our investigator interviewed him that night, and he ended up giving a story. It was kind of a weird story. His official position was he blacked out and didn't know what happened that night.

JE: Well, that's something—to be sitting in the car, both of you in the front seat, next to a man who could commit that kind of a horrendous crime.

DE: But I was back next to my .38 at that time.

JE: Right. Did he know that?

DE: I don't—I didn't show it.

JE: No, no, no. What about death penalty cases?

DE: That was one, and he got the death penalty. It ended up being reversed by the United States Supreme Court. Our law says that one of the aggravating circumstances is that the murder is particularly heinous, atrocious, or cruel. The seminal case on that was the Eddings case out of Creek County. Monty Lee Eddings killed a trooper named Larry Crabtree with a single shot from a sawed-off shotgun. He was given the death penalty, and one of the aggravating circumstances was it was particularly heinous, atrocious, or cruel. The argument was, if you look at the totality of the circumstances—he used an illegal weapon to begin with, he was laughing about it ahead of time, he laughed about it afterward, there were other people in the car—the court said considering the totality of the circumstances, it was heinous, atrocious, or cruel.

We had that aggravator in the Cartwright case. Judge Summers, who was later on the Supreme Court, was our trial judge, and he asked that it be briefed. I gave him Monty Lee Eddings. That case was later reversed because Eddings was 16 at the time of the crime, and it was reversed on those grounds—the death penalty. They never touched the heinous, atrocious, or cruel standard. So Eddings was still good law, and Summers agreed, and we were allowed to use it. They did assess the death penalty. It got reversed and came back. By that time, the victim who survived—Charma Riddle—was working in my office. Her husband, Hugh, was the murder victim. So Charma was in the driver's seat. He got 75 years for what he did to Charma and the death penalty for what he did to Hugh.

The appellate public defenders came in—they had agreed, as a plea bargain—life without parole was not available because it did not exist at the time of the crime. But they agreed that if we would not seek another death penalty, they would agree to serve life plus the 75 years he got for Charma, consecutively, with no credit for any time served up to that point. He'd been on death row already for a number of years. Charma said, "Well, I'd just as soon not go through the trial again."

There was another aggravator we had—knowingly creating a risk of death to more than one person. That was a lay-down. There's not even a question about it. He killed Hugh and nearly killed Charma. So we had that one. I don't know whether a jury would give him the death penalty again. I wouldn't be surprised if they would have. But Charma said she'd just as soon take the life plus 75, and so we did that agreement.

Chapter 9 – 3:00
Death Penalty

John Erling (JE): Let me ask you, what was your personal view then of the death penalty, and does that still hold today?

Drew Edmondson (DE): It still holds today, although not with the strength it held during the time I was actively prosecuting or the time that I was AG. In those days, I was a pretty strong supporter. And I think in retrospect, it was because I had something to say about it. You know, in my jurisdiction, not every homicide is a death penalty case. You had to have the aggravating circumstance. Most of all, I would want the death penalty necessary as societal self-defense. Even if a person is given life, there are still other inmates in jeopardy—prison personnel, medical personnel. If I felt that person was a risk to human life, then I would seek the death penalty.

And the ones that we sought that on—I'm sorry, I'm blanking on the name of one. I remember his victim was a lady named Sherry Graber, and his first name was Michael. He went over bound and determined to have a relationship with her. He knew her from the flower shop where she worked, and he carried with him a gun, a knife, and a pair of handcuffs. She ended up being shot to death by him. And what got him the death penalty—she had a five-year-old son named Andy. He killed Andy because Andy was a witness. That was the decider for me. Otherwise, he'd have probably been a life or life without parole. And by the way, during the time I was D.A., I always went to the scene of the homicide—and usually also went out to the hospital. So I saw Sherry and Andy, dead in the ER. That was not a difficult one for me.

JE: But you had to go to those scenes to internalize this and—

DE: My idea of going to the scene of the homicide was at some point in time I need to explain this to a jury. And, you know, there are pictures—there are lots of pictures of the crime scene—but that doesn't put it in your head the way actually seeing it does. So, where you can explain what in this picture—where is it in relation to the body and things of that nature—I felt it was an obligation.

Chapter 10 – 6:55
Mike Synar

John Erling (JE): You resigned in your third term to run for Congress in 1992. And that's when you ran for 2nd Congressional District in '92 against the incumbent Mike Synar?

Drew Edmondson (DE): That's the second time. I ran after two years in the Oklahoma legislature—I was elected in '74—and in '76, I made a race against Ted Risenhoover.

JE: And you lost that race?

DE: Lost that race. I lost both races for Congress. I was gearing up to run again, and I think I would have run again except Susan Loving resigned as Attorney General, and friends of mine in Oklahoma City were telling me that I would love that job and I ought to run for it. Probably with mixed motives—they probably thought I'd make a great AG, but they also wanted to avoid another bloodbath in the 2nd District.

JE: Oh yes, because you would call that a bloodbath. This was against Mike Synar, so this is interesting because the Synar family, the Edmondson family is huge in Muskogee—in that area—so it was families against families. But he accused you—you were soft on crime. And you accused him because he was out of touch with his district. Because of Synar, he was against authorizing the death penalty for drug dealers. Is that summarizing it? Can you kind of talk about all that campaign?

DE: Well, the main part of the campaign was Mike Synar—for all of his intellect and ability, and heart and conscience and everything else—was not the kind of congressman my father was. He paid primary attention to D.C. and how he could be most effective as a congressman, achieving things—to the detriment of doing constituent services and working on sewer projects, water projects. He actually said, "Industrial recruitment is not my job. Industrial development is not my job as congressman." And I thought it very much was. Helping a community attract industry—whether it's a spur off a federal highway or a water project or something of that nature—was very much the job of the congressman. And it was a basic difference in what a congressman's number one job is. And it translated into the shorthand version that you recounted, which were accurate. But that wasn't the real motivation. The motivation was, he wasn't the kind of congressman I grew up thinking a congressman should be.

JE: That's why you went into the race, right. OK. But then you lost to him. How do you—how do I say this? You've won more races than you lost.

DE: Yes.

JE: How do you handle a loss—particularly a heated one like this? Does it dwell with you for months and years? Or how do you handle it?

DE: I think the first one was harder to handle—losing to Risenhoover. With all due respect, he was not half the congressman Mike Synar was. And to my way of thinking, he was an embarrassment to the state and to the district. Losing to him was particularly painful. I didn't have at that point in time a career path in mind. I had not been to law school. I didn't want to go back to teaching, particularly. I thought about working construction. I thought about several different things. A friend of mine had a little ad agency in Muskogee, and I started doing radio ads for S&Q Clothiers and stuff like that. And finally ended up in law school. Not finally—it didn't take long to go through those thought processes. I'd already been admitted. Law school had already started. And I actually picked up the schedule of a young lady who had dropped out. So I took her schedule and started law school about two weeks late.

JE: So you're saying—because you were in some major campaigns, and we'll get into the governor races and all that—that Ted Risenhoover loss stung more than your other losses?

DE: Yes, that was one of only two losses.

JE: OK, I'm sorry—I don't blame you. I'm trying—

DE: To remember what the other one was?

JE: No, that was the governor's I was thinking about, right?

DE: Oh yeah.

JE: Mike Synar—he died in office, didn't he?

DE: Yes. Brain cancer. Very sad. Very young.

JE: Your family—was there always a rift between them?

DE: No. The—

JE: And you and Mike? Did you ever resolve any of that, or probably not afterward?

DE: I don't think either one of us made that effort. But the Synar family was important. They had the Oklahoma Land and Cattle Company. They did a lot of farming, ranching. Mike was real big in FFA and did FFA speech contests the same time I was doing debate, on another track. He was also a debater, by the way. We had some debates that were—

JE: Opposing each other?

DE: Oh yeah. Yeah. I may have some of them on tape if you ever want to look. DK Swan was in that Oklahoma Land and Cattle Company, and he ended up being a highway commissioner for David Hall. They were important. But I didn't know them politically growing up. And I knew them all—I knew the politicians—and I did not consider that a political family, but an important family.

JE: Like your family was a political family, and they necessarily weren't. Mike was probably the only one of the Synar family to run for public office.

DE: I think that's correct. I think his name was Alan Synar, who was a city attorney in Edmond. But no, they were not a political family.

Chapter 11 – 4:40
Tobacco Industry

John Erling (JE): You were elected Oklahoma Attorney General then in 1994?

Drew Edmondson (DE): That's correct.

JE: And we should mention that you filed suit with other attorneys general against the tobacco industry.

DE: Yes.

JE: And that was a major, major settlement in 1996.

DE: 1996.

JE: What kind of money was that? Did that involve...

DE: It's still coming in. We ran an estimate of how much—because the media wanted to know, of course, how much is the settlement for—and they computed it out 25 years, and it was just over $2 billion. No, $200 billion. Oklahoma's share was just over $2 billion in the first 25 years, and we're past the 25 years—the money is still coming in. The Tobacco Settlement Endowment Trust, which gets 75% of that annual check coming in, I think the corpus is approaching $2 billion on TSET. The other 25% goes into the general fund.

The lawsuit was—I hesitate to say fun—but it was kind of... it is a big lawsuit. And we had outside counsel that had already made buckets of money off asbestos, and so they were able to fund the amount of discovery that went on in that thing, which was incredibly immense. Millions of sheets of paper, and hundreds of depositions, and, you know, it's just an incredible deal.

We filed it in Norman, in Cleveland County, as a result of a survey that we did on citizen attitudes. We wanted a county—Oklahoma County and Tulsa County were not attractive to us because we didn't know who we would draw as a judge. There were too many judges to make any kind of reasonable prediction. So we were looking for a county where there are two or three district judges, any one of whom would be fine. There were several counties that fit that category, and of those, the one that polled the

best—potential jurors polled the best on being favorable towards an action against the tobacco industry—was Cleveland County. It's probably not a surprise. And so we filed it in Norman.

JE: And you were holding them liable. Tell me exactly the core of it.

DE: The theory in the law is called unjust enrichment. The tobacco industry was manufacturing this product, people were smoking it willingly—there were even warnings on the packages telling them this was dangerous and bad—which in large part is why the tobacco industry had never lost a lawsuit. They'd never settled a lawsuit. If they lost at the trial level, they appealed, and they never lost an appeal. So they were untouched by litigation up until the lawsuit of the attorneys general.

And the theory that almost uniformly was employed was unjust enrichment. That is, they're making billions, the smokers are happy smoking until they die, but the state of Oklahoma is getting stuck with the medical bill—what we pay in terms of our share of Medicaid and veterans benefits and things of that nature. We actually sued for a billion, and we could quantify that statistically on how much that had cost us. By not being responsible for that treatment and medical care, the tobacco companies were unjustly enriched. That was the theory.

JE: Were you the lead attorney on that?

DE: On paper I was. And we hadn't gotten to trial yet. But I would go for the hearings—the motion hearings and things of that nature—and was absolutely the lead attorney in terms of decision-making. And that was in the contract with the private law firms also: the lead attorney in terms of determining what was going to be said to the public and what was not going to be said to the public about the litigation.

Chapter 12 – 9:30
Candidate for Governor

John Erling (JE): But then in 1998, you became the second Oklahoma Attorney General to win re-election unopposed.

Drew Edmondson (DE): Yes. That's my first time out after my first election—I drew no opponent. Which is a much better way to run. I did that four times as DA.

JE: And then you were elected to your third term by defeating Denise Bode, right? We should also give you— you served as president of the National Association of Attorneys General in 2002 and 2003. You were elected to a fourth term in 2010, ran against Republican James Dunn, but then you chose not to run again. But you chose to run for governor. What was your thinking? Was governor—was that always in your mind?

DE: No. It was an exit strategy. I think I had done—at least I was of the opinion that I had done—as much as I could do as Attorney General. We had some good wins. I thought the Illinois River case was going to be a good win, and it ended up—13 years later—as a good win. It didn't happen right away, but we'd finished the case and I felt very good about it. And tobacco, of course. The one campaign pledge of 1994 was to do something about the death penalty appeals process, and we got that done—right after the Murrah bombing. So that happened early in my first term.

JE: Yes, those are big. But what about cockfighting?

DE: Yeah, what about cockfighting. I thought I was done on that. You know, the petition outlawed cockfighting. It was attacked two ways. One way—they were filing individual actions. The cockfighters, in most of the counties, were in southern Oklahoma, and local judges were enjoining the state from enforcing the new cockfighting ban on various grounds. And we filed a motion with the State Supreme Court to combine all of those cases into a single case. And they heard it and ruled that the cockfighting ban was constitutional and enforceable.

At that point in time, I actually thought I'd done my job on cockfighting. It's only been in recent years—and I'm not in office anymore, but I'm still doing some work in that regard—that the cockfighting ban, in many areas of the state, is being observed in the breach. That it's still—if you're in that circle—it's pretty open. If you're not in the circle, you might not hear about it, but people who are engaged in it know about where it's happening and how to get there and participate. And so we're continuing to press those in power to do their jobs.

JE: It's laughable, isn't it—why we can't stop that?

DE: It is. I don't know whether it's ethos or pathos, but one of the places that we could not get action on—deputies had stumbled across. I don't think—they didn't have a search warrant for a cockfight, but they got a complaint about a disturbance, and they went to check out on the disturbance, and they found a cockfight in operation—in progress. And they arrested some people and seized equipment and stuff like that. Went nowhere. Well, the whole thing was happening within a half a mile of where a deputy lived. You know, law enforcement knows about it in these counties, and they're turning a blind eye.

JE: Yeah, must be some nice money being handed around.

DE: They formed a political action committee fairly recently and were handing out money to members of the legislature to try to get the penalties reduced for cockfighting. You know, and the idea that there could be, like, a cocaine sellers' political action committee that wants the penalties for distributing cocaine to people reduced—or to get it off the controlled dangerous substance list—and they'd be in Oklahoma City in the Capitol building handing out checks to legislators. To me, it's the same thing. Cockfighting is a felony. It's a state felony and a federal felony, and here they are, trying to get legislators to ease up a little bit.

JE: And apparently are...it's working.

DE: They're getting some success with some members. They haven't passed anything through both houses yet.

JE: OK, you said you ran for governor as an exit strategy from Attorney General?

DE: A little bit facetious, but not totally. I'd gone about as far as I could go, and I was ready to either step up or step out. As Linda and I put it—either way, we win. You don't have to do that anymore. You can go out and start practicing law.

JE: You lost in the primary to Lieutenant Governor Jari Askins by fewer than 6/100ths of a percent. That's about 1,500 votes. You could have asked for a recount.

DE: I don't believe... you know, if it had been 15 votes, I might have asked for a recount, but not 1,500.

JE: Too many votes. Some people have done that, haven't they?

DE: Yes, they have. I have not known anybody with that much of a spread that was successful on a recount. And half the time, if you were 1,500 behind, you'd be 1,650 behind after the recount. I have never seen it successful when there are significant numbers, even though it's a very small percent.

JE: Then you threw your support to Askins?

DE: Of course.

JE: Due to term limits, your record of 16 years in office as Oklahoma State Attorney General will most likely be unbroken.

DE: The longest in this century and in this millennium. But Mac Q. Williamson served longer—he was back World War II and up until the '50s or '60s.

JE: By the way, we should come back here—Jari Askins, even though you threw your support to Askins, she ultimately lost to Mary Fallin—Republican Mary Fallin. Then somehow you decided to run for governor again.

DE: Eight years later, after eight years of Mary Fallin—who is a very sweet lady and very well-intentioned and I think highly principled—but I thought she had a miserable record as governor, particularly in the area of education. And to my way of thinking, education is just the key to development, growth as a state. Governor Stitt ran wanting to be a Top Ten state. And I think things are getting worse—even more areas where we're in the bottom ten than there were before. Be that as it may, that was the impetus of my making that race in 2018. I knew how to do it. I knew how to make the race. I knew how to do the job. And I thought it needed to be done.

I really thought my opponent would be Mick Cornett.

JE: The mayor of Oklahoma City?

DE: Yeah. I really thought he would be my opponent. I'm not sure anybody handicapping that race at its outset would have picked Kevin Stitt as the winner.

JE: Right. But also, you're a Democrat—we're in a Republican state. You had the odds against you from the very get-go.

DE: Well, that's true.

JE: But Kevin Stitt didn't have any experience in politics at all—was a businessman and came along. But he did have the Republican side to him...

DE: Yes.

JE: And the conservative Republican as well.

DE: That's true.

JE: So this wasn't all about you. It was about the lay of the land.

DE: The lay of the land was daunting, and that did not escape my notice. But I certainly didn't think it was impossible. One advantage that Stitt had—besides a great deal of wealth—was that he did not have a record. As a matter of fact, he didn't know much about government at all. And I'm sure he's learned a lot since. But he didn't know much during the campaign and didn't know much for the first few years in office either.

I had really hoped for Mick Cornett because he had the disability of having been a mayor. And they have not fared well in state—not only a mayor, a big city mayor—and historically they have not fared well in statewide elections, Democrat or Republican. But it was not to be.

Chapter 13 – 10:10
2024 Politics

John Erling (JE): So you lose, and then you just say, that's it for politics. I'm done?

Drew Edmondson (DE): As a candidate. I'm still—

JE: Excuse me, as a candidate.

DE: I still write checks...

JE: You're still involved.

DE: ...to candidates and support them and give advice when asked. But I will not be a candidate again.

JE: Be difficult for a Democrat to win. We're sitting in 2024. What is it—another two years before Governor Stitt leaves office? It might be difficult for another Democrat to come along and win.

DE: Well, it will be difficult, but it will happen. You know, just demographics tell us that. The demographics of Oklahoma are shifting in favor of the Democratic Party—slowly, but they are. In my race, I ran strongest in Oklahoma County and Tulsa County, which is 180 degrees off what I grew up with, where you tried to do well in the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th districts to offset Tulsa County and Oklahoma County. And now it's the other way around. And the municipalities are where the growth is taking place. The more our cities grow, the stronger the Democratic Party is going to be. I don't know if it's going to be in the race two years from now, or the race four years from now, or ten years from now—but it's going to happen. The numbers will come back.

And I'm not saying it'll ever be the one-sidedness that we are enjoying now with Republican control, and enjoyed for 50 or 60 years under Democratic control—I hope it's not. But I think both parties need to be competitive for us to have a vibrant state.

JE: Yeah. That caused Governor Stitt to lose in his hometown.

DE: Yeah.

JE: Maybe we can have a little review of politics, what it is like today—because we hope people will be listening to this in 10, 25 years from now, and 50 years. The politics today in the United States—understatement to call it divisive. In all your assessment of where we stand today...

DE: I think it's toxic. I think it's—obviously dangerously toxic. I think Joe Biden, our president, was spot on when he said, "We've got to cool things off a little bit. We've got to calm things down a little bit." I don't know if anybody's listening to him or if it will have any effect, but I think he's absolutely correct.

You know, we're all Americans. We all hope the future is better for our children than the past was for us. We all share those kinds of goals and ambitions. Why are we so hateful to each other is beyond me. I don't know.

I've felt very strongly about Richard Nixon, for example. I thought he was a corrupting influence on our Constitution and our system. But I never hated him. I never wanted anything bad to happen—other than going to jail or being impeached. I never wanted any harm to come to him. But people are publicly nasty now about our candidates. That engenders a sentiment that politicians should be fair game, and we witnessed that in Pennsylvania.

JE: Right. And I was going to say—here we are sitting Wednesday, July 17th. It was last Saturday—attempted assassination of our former president Donald Trump. And this year hasn't played out yet, because there could be retaliation on that as well. You just never know.

But then we have a former president running, and then we have Joe Biden running. He's 81 years old, and people say that he's too old. And we have Donald Trump running—who's a convicted felon and has been impeached.

DE: Only 34 counts.

JE: Thirty-four counts. So that's what America is looking at today. As a Democrat, do you have an opinion on Joe Biden and his condition of being too old? You know, there's a difference between being 81 and aging. Some people age better at 81 than others do. So Joe Biden—so much of it is about optics. When we see him, does he appear too old? And that's what America is grappling with right now. I should be having you tell me this, but you're going to answer this pretty soon. America wishes neither one of them were running. We can do better than that. Now you can come back and retort to that, but that's one opinion.

DE: I think that opinion is borne out by polling data—that there's a dissatisfaction with both candidates. I don't know how it's going to play out. I know I watched the first debate and was very disappointed by my candidate's performance in that debate. Joe Biden, I think, did not do well.

But there are other instances of presidential candidates that did not do well in their first debate and did better in their second one and won the

presidency. So that was not necessarily fatal.

What struck me by George Stephanopoulos' interview with Joe Biden was not so much the entire performance, but the question George asked—whether President Biden had watched the video of the debate afterwards. And he didn't remember.

You know, I'm a trial lawyer, litigator, prosecutor. I have cross-examined debaters. I have cross-examined defendants. And that was such an opening. It just hit me—what do you mean you don't remember? How do you not remember whether or not you've watched yourself in a debate?

JE: And then he interviewed with Lester Holt of NBC, and he admitted he hadn't seen it, but he saw pieces of it.

DE: Saw pieces of it. And I actually thought—Linda thought he was a little too hostile in the Lester Holt interview—I thought he did better in the Lester Holt interview than he did in the George Stephanopoulos. But that could be damning with faint praise, because he did not do well at all in the Stephanopoulos interview.

JE: So the argument then—I'm talking about future generations listening to this—the argument is now, amongst his party, should Joe Biden step down? Let Kamala Harris or somebody else run instead?

In light of the energy that's come about because the former president was assassinated—and he said "fight, fight"—there seems to be an energy in the Republican Party now. That's something the Democrats are going to have to deal with. And can Joe Biden then be the one that leads them out of that?

DE: Don't know. And I don't know—there are several openings. One of which is, President Biden has said that if his neurologist tells him he's not up to it, it would have an impact. And I think also, if Joe Biden reaches the conclusion—either from input from people that he trusts or from data—that he cannot win and that Kamala Harris could...

You know, something could happen between now and our convention to cause Joe to change his mind—which, up to now, has been pretty adamant that he's staying in—and allow the convention to... I think they

would nominate Kamala Harris and get a good running mate for her.

And one of the reasons—number one, I like Kamala Harris. I knew her when she was Attorney General. I supported her in her race for the Senate. And we actually had a conversation where she told me she was related to some people I knew in Muskogee—the Simmons family: J.J. and Don and Jake Jr. She is related to them, according to her, and I believe her.

One of the big things that the convention will look at is the amount of money that's been raised. It's been raised in the name of the Biden-Harris ticket—which means that Kamala Harris, as the presidential candidate, could access it. But Joe Smakatola couldn't. You know, nobody else except Joe Biden and Kamala Harris could use that money. And I think it's over $100 million at this point. Anybody else we nominate starts from scratch.

JE: OK. And then particularly if Joe Biden said, "I highly endorse Kamala," that would carry some weight too.

DE: And of course he would. If he were voluntarily leaving the race—he picked her because he thought she would make a good president. She was up to it.

JE: So in the next few weeks, as we sit here in 2024, we're uncertain of that.

Chapter 14 – 5:20
No Scandal

John Erling (JE): You know, you see all this—and the vitriol that comes along with serving in public—why would anybody want to run for office?

Drew Edmondson (DE): Oh, that reminds me of the story of the fellow who was in charge of cleaning out the pen of the Republican mascot, which of course is an elephant. And every day he'd be in there shoveling to clear out the pen. And one of his buddies says, "Why in the world don't you leave that job?" And he said, "And give up politics?"

JE: Right, yeah.

DE: There are a number of motivations. Some people are in it for the accumulation of power and to get in a position to make a bunch of money. I don't have much use for them. If you're in it to do a good job—whether I agree with you on how you do it or not—if you're sincere about wanting to make a better Oklahoma or a better nation, then I admire your interest in getting into politics and doing it right. And there are people—thank God—that still want a better state and a better country and are willing to put their name on the line to get that done. And I admire them, regardless of party, if they're sincere.

JE: But it's such an awful, awful game. I hear about it and it just seems like the mafia. They're all out to get each other and they'll lie to each other's faces. And one day they'll say something, and the next day they say something else. I don't think that profession's very high up on the totem pole right now in America. Would you agree?

DE: I think—well, there are actually polls that show that being a sanitation engineer—which we used to call a garbage man—ranks a little higher than being a politician on opinion polls. But still, you know, if you've got a son or a daughter that's in the military overseas and you need to get them home for a funeral—and your congressman can get that done—you appreciate it.

JE: Yeah, serving as a public servant is not a bad thing. People kind of disparage it, but it's an honorable thing to serve, I would imagine. And your advice to young people who are thinking about it—what would you say?

DE: Well, it's not gonna get better unless good people are involved. So be involved. You know, if you can pick somebody who's running for something and offer to hand out leaflets for them or knock doors for them—and it doesn't have to be president—it could be city council or state representative. Or run yourself.

I know a young lady in eastern Oklahoma who's running for the legislature. Never thought about running for anything before. But the guy that introduced the bill to immunize the poultry companies from any litigation for polluting the rivers—she thought was way out of line. And she's running against him. And she doesn't have a huge chance, but if she doesn't run, she has no chance. And, you know, she's out doing her patriotic duty because she disagreed on an issue. Not because she thinks

he's rotten because he's a Republican—no, she disagrees on an issue. And that's what political races ought to be about: issues.

JE: Well, you've contributed a lot to this state. Your entire family has, of course, and you ought to be thanked in many ways. My little voice here doesn't mean much, but it does across the state. And I know you've been honored in many, many ways. So we thank you for that.

And by the way, when I was at KRMG, I think you and I talked—we were on a once-a-month basis, weren't we? We tried—talked about the issues of the day and all—so we did that for many years. Anything that you're proud of—politically or whatever—what would you say you're most proud of?

DE: Well, you know, almost 10 years as DA in Muskogee, two years in the legislature, and 16 years as Attorney General—and I never got indicted. I think most people would say there wasn't a hint of scandal in those years and in those offices. And, you know, more than anything that I may have accomplished, I'm proud of that—that I served honorably.

JE: With no taint, as we say. No, no taint. How would you like to be remembered?

DE: I would like to be remembered as someone who did make a difference on some issues and did some things that will outlive both of us and still be around doing good after that.

JE: Yeah, very good. Well, Drew, I want to thank you for this—giving your time. And talking to you, of course, is like a piece of history of Oklahoma. There's no question about that. And you're admired by all across the state, so thank you for adding your voice to Voices of Oklahoma.

DE: Thank you, John. It's been a pleasure.

JE: You bet.