



Policy on Purpose

Episode 10: Former LBJ School dean and Deputy Secretary of State James Steinberg

(guitar music)

NARRATOR: This is “Policy on Purpose,” a podcast produced by the LBJ School of Public Affairs at The University of Texas at Austin. We take you behind the scenes of policy, with the people who help shape it. For more visit lbj.utexas.edu.

ANGELA EVANS: Welcome everyone to the podcast “Policy on Purpose,” and today I have a very, very special guest: Jim Steinberg. And Jim is special in a lot of different ways. One, he's special because he was part of the LBJ School, and did so much at the school while he was here — very innovative, even though he only had one term here. [He] did a lot of innovative things at this school that we're still benefiting from. Another way that it is so special for me is he is the one that actually brought me to the LBJ School, and the third and really the reason we want to talk to Jim today is, he has an amazing career for a relatively young man. So I can say that because he is my junior by many years. But Jim has had so much success in the public sector. You know, he served as the deputy secretary of state under Mr. Obama's administration, under Ms. Clinton. And now he is at the Maxwell School. He served as dean at the Maxwell School and after his deanship, he is now serving as the professor of social science, international affairs and law at the Maxwell School, which is the No. 1-rated public administration school, and he has a lot of experience in think tanks. So, when you think about think tanks, public sector, big positions in the federal government, that's like a combination of experience that gives you different insights that I really want to probe a little bit today. Welcome, Jim.

JIM STEINBERG: Great. Thank you. It's wonderful to be back here. I can't tell you how happy it makes me to be back and see the LBJ School doing so well and being fortunate enough to have you in a chat.

EVANS: Well, thank you so much. Thank you. So Jim, I really want to do two things today. One is I really want to talk to you about the role we play in serving in academic institutions that play a role in preparing the next generation of our policy folks. That's one, and the other I want to talk to you about is some of the challenges we face in that role and preparing our students for a relationship with China, which has caused a lot of questions, issues, consternation and uncertainty.

Let's start with the first one. When we're thinking about the kinds of students who come to our schools, these are students who have a purpose. They want to do a public good. They want to step into the public realm. What is it that you're seeing over the last years that you've been in academia that you think we need to be talking and working with our students to prepare them differently than we've prepared them

maybe 15, 20 years ago?

STEINBERG: It's a great question. I do think it's an enormously important challenge for all of us to think about how do we prepare people to make a difference, because there are things that have changed about our students over the years that I've been teaching. One thing that hasn't changed is their motivation to make a difference. That's been a constant. I think what keeps us all going is to see this very strong, very idealistic sense of the importance of, and the ability, to make a difference. I think the challenge has become more difficult in recent years for a variety of reasons. The first, and perhaps most important, is just a multiplicity of actors who are broadly in the public space. It's possible to think maybe 50 years ago when the LBJ School was founded, and a lot of the other schools of public affairs were founded, that most of the action was in government. Mostly at the national government level, a little bit on the international level, but large national governments [were] where things were happening. Then, obviously, to the extent that it was involved in domestic issues it could be state and local governments as well. Today we see that there are a lot more different actors. Society is much more active, jails are much more active, and the private sector is much more active. Not only are there more actors involved, but there are the kinds of solutions that we need to deal with contemporary problems means bringing all these actors to the table. It requires a much more diverse portfolio of skills and understanding for students to be able to navigate that.

Not to mention the fact that careers have changed. Nobody holds a lifetime job. I went into government, and I've come in and out, but there are many people who had a lifetime career in foreign service. A lifetime career in civil service. It's much rarer today and become even rarer over time. You have on one hand the universe of actors and solutions, much more diverse and multifaceted. The likely career trajectories for our students are also more diverse. We have to prepare not to answer today's questions, right, but to answer the questions they're going to deal with 20 years from now. It requires the ability to have this multidisciplinary, multidimensional approach and get students to think about what are the skills and perspectives that will serve them across all these different worlds and universes. What are the kinds of foundational things that they need to know that will serve them whether they are in the private sector, civil society, local government, national government and international organization? What will be the things that are still relevant 20 or 30 years from now when technology has changed? So those problems have changed.

EVANS: This is a very tall order, because the benefit we have is we sit in the middle of some wonderful universities. Most of their policy schools are part of larger institutions which we can draw on those disciplines. Yet those disciplines have two big problems that I see. One is that they're very specific, and they tend to be narrow. The second thing is that universities often don't have the administrative structure, the understanding of how to bring all of these together. That adds another dimension of difficulty for a policy school that says we have to bring these various disciplines together to try to look at getting at an understanding of problems, understanding data, and how those problems are defined. Then being creative with solutions that are feasible and feasible across many audiences. One of the things that we've been doing here at the LBJ School is really starting to think about what are those skills that are long-term skills, or basic skills, that students can grow those skills over time. Then, how do we help students grow coalitions? It's a very different kind of an educational approach than, like you say, even 20 years ago where you do a stat class — I'm simplifying this, but you do a stat class, a research methodology class, and then you take like a survey class in global issues.

STEINBERG: Yep. I think the institutional questions are tough. I love all my children at all the schools I've been at, but one of the advantages that I've had at the Maxwell School is that Maxwell is the only public

policy school in the country that has all the social sciences within the Maxwell School. So I was not just dean of public affairs, public administration and international affairs, but I was also dean of political science, economics, sociology, anthropology, geography and, importantly, history. We had a sort of advantage in being able to bring these disciplines to the table. We still had certain degrees of silos, but I think it was a real insight that allowed bridging both across disciplines and across the world of more academic and theoretical work to the world of practice. I think that that is something that even for places like the LBJ School, where the architecture of the university is different. Building these ties to the disciplines is really important. Trying to think about how you expose students to these different ways of thinking about problems, because each of the disciplines brings a different set of perspectives that are useful for the practitioner. That a practitioner doesn't just need global science tools, doesn't just need economic tools, doesn't just need sociology tools or anthropology tools — he needs to be able to draw on all of those things.

The first thing, I think, is for policy students in particular to get some sense about how do these different disciplines — what do they bring to the table, and incorporate that into our curriculum for policy school students. I think the next thing is to get this blend of knowledge plus practice and feasibility. I have worked very hard on this as a teacher to try to think about what is the balance between how much theoretical knowledge do you want, and how much do you want to be applied. I've always believed that one of the most neglected tools that we don't study, either as academic researchers or teachers, is what I call the problem of the second best. The nature of the academy is looking for the optimal solution and the most disciplined are looking for the utmost solution, but that means that initial conditions are very constrained. It's a laboratory kind of environment.

Practitioners don't have that luxury. The knowledge isn't perfect. As you mentioned, you have to build coalitions that are diverse interest. So building a set of approaches that recognize that we're satisfying in many cases rather than optimizing is a really important skill to try to teach. How do you build coalitions and how do you have a clear sense of your objectives, but recognize that you're not going to fulfill all of them at once? How do you find ways of accommodating different viewpoints? How do you deal with the imperfections of the real world is a set of skills that I think we need to put more attention to in our curriculum, and really build them into where we teach?

EVANS: Yeah, I think you're mentioning the word “skills.” Some people think this is a bad term. Like, “Oh, skills, we're making them do apprenticeships, and we're sacrificing the theoretical big thinking.” If you think about theoretical works it's really setting frameworks. Thinkers are thinking about how do we think about these things in large frames. Then after we get those frameworks then we can think about how they really play out. So experiential learning is absolutely critical, and it's been in the LBJ School's DNA because in the beginning it was the practitioner as well as the theoretician. We're seeing it more and more, and people are looking at public policy schools to be that bridge of the discoveries and knowledge that took place in the university, and taking it outside. Also the other way: Bringing things that people on the outside need who are really solving problems now, not 20 years from now, and bringing that into the university so you try to understand your research and how you design your research has some application to what's going on now.

STEINBERG: Absolutely. I'll give a plug here for one of my funders, the Carnegie Corporation, which for many years has been involved in what they call the Bridging the Gap program. It's to recognize that, one, there is a gap between the world of the academy and the world of practice, but two, that both worlds would benefit from closer ties. I've been working very closely with another alumnus from the LBJ School,

Frank Gavin, who is now at John Hopkins, in a project that's trying to think about how do we get the best of both worlds. How do we make our teaching toward our students who are going into practice more rigorous so that it isn't just a bunch of war stories, and off the top of your head judgments, but it's also related to the constraints of real-world practice? I think there is tremendous opportunity that if you have a good grounding in strong methods and strong theory that will inform your ability to be a good practitioner, but it can't be the only thing you have. It's the great saying that was always attributed to a French diplomat who was once reported to have said, "Yes, I know it works in practice, but can it work in theory?"

EVANS: Yes. *(Laughing)* Let's flip that.

STEINBERG: So we need both. I think that the policy schools in particular are uniquely placed to do that because of their ability to tap into — and the fact that most of the faculty, even in our public policy schools, often come from disciplines. They have that grounding. They have that knowledge about what's going on in the more academic, the more theoretical world, but also are connected to the applied world both in their teaching and their research. I think both are important. We need faculty who not only teach to this end, but also have their research focused on taking the kind of rigor that comes from academic work, but applying toward real-world problems.

EVANS: I was fortunate enough too. We got several grants from the National Science Foundation as well, to try to think about how you take knowledge and the strength of the disciplines and the university to put it through a lens of policy or public administration, then put it out there. It's not easy. I think the community in general is struggling with this but understand it. So at least that's a good step. It's that people understand this is something we need to do. There's probably lots of different ways to do this. There's not a way or the way — there's a bunch of ways. So those are things we have to keep thinking about as policy educators, and keeping our eye on the ball and also being active like you are.

Having professors who are active in the community, stay active in the community so they can bring that knowledge back into the schools. This gets me into another thing I wanted to talk to you about, because I think one of the difficult things — there's two things really. One is when you think about global, because you started the global degree program here, I often think about global as different than international.

You're thinking bilateral, unilateral, or diplomacy. Global is when you think about a problem and that problem has definite implications for the United States, but for us to handle that problem we have to play with other people around the world on this problem. Teaching students the — what you're saying in the beginning here about multidisciplinary it even makes it even more difficult. Now you're looking at global players that might change given what the situation is. Working with them so that we can benefit them, but also benefit the United States. I think the jury is still out on how well we're doing with that. Do you agree?

STEINBERG: I do. I mean, I think we started the global studies program because of the conviction that all the problems have linkages to the environment beyond the United States or beyond any single country. We picked global because it wasn't just a matter between nations, but it was all kinds of networks and connections that were taking place. When I taught the basic course here when we first started the degree, and the first assignment was come up with a policy problem which does not have a connection outside the borders of the United States. Of course there is no such thing. Even the things that we think of as very local like education, or sewers, or things like that all have an international dimension and a global dimension. Understanding those linkages and understanding that that boundary is a totally artificial one. Boundaries-- hear a lot about walls these days, but boundaries really are highly permeable, and we are

affected in ways that people don't even think hard enough about. Then the question is how do you teach to that, because the complexity can somehow make it all seem as unmanageable. On the one hand you have to appreciate the complexity, on the other hand you have to tease out the strands because you can't deal with everything simultaneously.

EVANS: No, it's overwhelming...

STEINBERG: For the mathematically inclined I always used to say it's like partial differential equations. You can't solve all of it but you have to break it up into these partial elements, but not lose sight of the fact that it's embedded in it in a broader context. That means exposing students to these complex systems, these connections, and exposing them to the fact that perceptions of these problems differ from country to country. There are some similarities and places where we see problems are very similar, and some places where we see different approaches and different views.

EVANS: I think this is still our challenge, and getting professors who can do that. As you say, we're a public policy school — it's great, but we draw on these disciplines. To be successful in your discipline sometimes you have to do deep dives, you don't think more globally you think more about your specific approach to things.

STEINBERG: But you know one of the great strengths here, and I think it had a lot of influence on my own thinking, because of the strong connection that UT and the LBJ School has always had to our neighbor to the south. That kind of transboundary, “intermestic” dimension so many people like Peter Ward and others would work on really brought home to me that, especially for border states and border communities like here; you see it all the time on everything — on water, on air, on people, on health. Second, sort of the ability to think about how do you build institutions and programs that address this. This strong connection that UT has to Latin America, and the LBJ School has had with Latin America, I think is a model of how to think about and work these problems.

EVANS: I don't usually use the word “exploit” but that's a good word here because we can drive to the border, and we have so many alums and presence in Mexico and Latin America. That's one of the strategic directions that we're taking, and there's so many things to think about in terms of trade, civil systems, etc. Latin America is not all one thing either, right? But the one area where I'm interested in getting your perspective is when we start talking about China. Here you have a massive economy — a massive country, and sometimes there's sort of this love-hate relationship, or there's this sympathetic versus not-so-sympathetic approach to China. You have a communist system but it's becoming economically more and more strong. When we're trying to think about this in terms of helping our students understand this major player in the world, how do we do this so we're balanced? When you were working in the State Department, how do you approach a potential adversary, but at the same time you really want to make sure the connections are there so that you understand what they're doing.

STEINBERG: Well that's a great question. For me it's a very poignant one because when I was a student, and beginning to think of international relations, of course the big challenge was the Soviet Union. My language of choice back in the day was Russian, and I studied Russian. One of the things I read was, my first teacher was a very good teacher but he learned his Russian in the Army, and had never spent any time in the Soviet Union. You couldn't go. A few Americans studied there, but you'd end up in Moscow state, and you were very cabined in. We have an advantage in dealing with China, at least now, but we're maybe we're turning in a different direction, which is there is still a tremendous amount of interchange.

We have just a gigantic influx of Chinese students, and more and more of our students who are now studying in China. So that's the first opportunity that we have is to really whatever the political issues between us, we can't cut off these avenues of exchange. We may not agree with China. Maybe we will end up in a competition, a rivalry, or worse but we need to understand them. This is a very big problem because a lot of what's going on I think reflects a deep failure to understand China. I think we understand a lot about Xi Jinping and the Politburo Standing Committee, but we don't understand as much as we should about China. So people need to go, they need to study, they need to see, they need to get to know Chinese.

EVANS: Yes

STEINBERG: And it is an advantage, by the way, that we have so many Chinese students in our schools. They're not, you know, a statistically representative sample of the Chinese people, but they are diverse, and there are a lot of them. And, you know, I have a lot of them in my classes, and it's really great because whatever the problems of freedom of expression in China — and I know there's a lot of fear about intimidation of Chinese students here, or that they are fifth column — I'm not seeing that. I'm really not seeing that in my classroom. My Chinese students are knowledgeable, they are, they have pride in their country, they're patriotic about their country, but they understand the issues and challenges. And so that's the first thing, is we really do have to get to know each other — we don't have to agree with each other, but we do have to get to know each other on the student-to-student and on faculty-to-faculty exchanges, we need to keep going. We can't sacrifice our commitment to academic freedom when we go, we can't refuse to talk about topics that we want to talk about. I've been very fortunate, I go and teach in China a lot and nobody's ever told me what I can or can't say, and I say what I think.

I was just there last week and I had some strong words to say about my concerns about what was going on in the Chinese leadership. So we have to keep those avenues open of understanding. And I think that if we do that, one, it gives us a better chance of managing the problems, but two, at least if we have difficulties, they will be real (*laughs*) rather than imagined. And one of the great dangers that we face is a danger because of our lack of knowledge in the other side, we tend to fear the worst and prepare for the worst. And that's understandable: If you don't really know what's going on, how else can you behave? But if we have a better understanding, I think that will help. And so we need to — it's a difficult time, both sides are pressuring the freedom of exchange, there's a lot coming out of the administration that worries me a great deal about the, sort of, notion that we can't — I mean, we've heard the president talk loosely about cutting off all students coming from China, which I think would be a terrible tragedy.

EVANS: Mhm, well, this gets back to the thing, too — we get back to global. You know, and if we become more and more isolationist — and I don't like to use that term because it's got a lot of baggage, but if we become more and more withdrawn and more and more making countries the "other," then this understanding, this cultural understanding, this understanding of how people work, what they're thinking, what they're researching — because the other part with the China situation is in addition to the, you know, the university's think tanks and you know, people think, "Well they're tied to the government, so we really can't work with them." But if we don't open ourselves up and we don't have confidence that the people here can do a good job there and understand, then we're going to close off a major potential partner player, or even influencing what goes on in China. It's been a challenge —

STEINBERG: Yeah, and I — you know, I mean I don't think we need to be naive about this, I mean —

EVANS: Yeah.

STEINBERG: Right, academics come from China to here, there are constraints; they are not as free to do and to engage in inquiry as we are here. And so, but the alternative just is to say, "Well, because they have these constraints and they can't fully speak freely that we shouldn't engage them." I think that's a terrible mistake. We have to just understand the limits of what's possible here — it's different from having an exchange with our friends in Mexico or the UK or whatever, but we still need to have that, and you know, there's still an opportunity to hear and learn from each other. And I think we need to have confidence in ourselves, that we're not threatened by this — I mean, I know we hear a lot about these Chinese influence campaigns, but to me, honestly, the notion that the China Daily taking out an ad in our newspaper is somehow going to threaten our — or that we can't tell the difference, I just don't find persuasive.

I think, though, it goes back to our earlier discussion about globalism, which is that you do hear in some of the critiques — and I don't want to make this sound too political, when the president attacks globalism, right? And sort of this idea that somehow that's a bad thing — it's not a good or bad thing, it's just a reality, right? We are interdependent; we can't cut ourselves off from these things, and while there are certainly some zero-sum features, even in the world of economics — which we think of as the world of vicious competition, we all know that while there have been costs of globalization, there have also been enormous benefits. And so understanding that and understanding globalization is a phenomenon which we need to both understand the risks and dangers, but also the opportunities is really critical. And that interdependence, which was why I did that exercise in my first class is basically to realize, we can't insulate ourselves. There is no wall high enough that will allow us to sort of live within ourselves. It was never true of this country, by the way. I mean, we have this sort of image, but as a student of American history, you know, we were a country that was founded on commerce, right? And we have never been able to extricate ourselves from the affairs of the world and even less so today.

EVANS: One of the things I wanted to get your opinion on as well is: I see the policy schools also playing a role in the university of bringing big thinkers into the university around — not that they have to be a big thinker in physics or astrophysics or, you know, genome project, but people who think big about things and think about the future. You know? As we're moving down this road — if I can use a metaphor, and we have to, we know that we're going to have an exit lane to the future, and we have to make sure we're ready to get into that exit lane. What role do you see the policy schools playing and bringing some of these large thinkers in — and not with the objective that they're going to be a visiting fellow and be here and do a class, but work for the university in terms of bringing larger kinds of concepts to the university?

STEINBERG: See, I think the perspective that policy schools bring that really is of comparative advantage here is that policy schools think about problems rather than tools and that's a different way of organizing inquiry, right? Which is rather than saying, you know, "What can we learn about particle physics?" or "What can we learn about low-carbon energy?" — and so the policy schools can help redefine the agenda of the universities, or our problems rather than disciplines or methods. And then use the disciplines and methods to help address the problems. So by becoming the place that helps the university identify "What are the big questions that society is grappling with?" whether it's AI, or whether it's the environment, and then think about who are the people, irrespective of what discipline they come from, that are thinking creatively and innovatively about it. So I think there are advantages less so much in the "who" as to the "what" we should be talking about and helping to think about that. And some of the innovative universities are more and more organizing themselves around big problems rather than, sort of, traditional departments, and I think the policy schools can really help lead the way in helping the universities think

that way about the inquiry that takes place on campus.

EVANS: When I was at a conference and, you know, you get into a session sometimes and people get you to think about things, and this thought came to me. When you think about public institutions, there's only really two public institutions that protect the differences of ideas that can sit side by side. So when you say — you go to a public library, you can go and you can look at all of the publications and there's not a judgment of this person's higher than this person — they're all on the same shelf, so to speak. You know what I mean? It's like idea by idea. The same thing that a public university should be as well and, you know, bringing ideas that are different — and like you said, not to fear the fact that somebody's going to say something that then it's all of a sudden all of our knowledge then is going to go out the window because we're going to get, like, swept up by this in a public university. Yet we're finding that there's a little bit more of timidity in this idea of bringing lots of different ideas to a university campus. So what do you see as the danger of that, or what do you see — maybe that's a loaded question. Maybe — give me your idea about the role of a public university in bringing different ideas together.

STEINBERG: It's a big challenge, and we've seen this in a lot of universities around campus for a variety of reasons. I'm very close to a number of people at the Miller Center at the University of Virginia, which has gone through this great controversy about this in which the question about whether voices from the Trump administration belong — not so much to speak on campus, I don't think, that's really indisputable that people should come and speak, but whether they belong as members of the academic community. And it's a tough question, you know? Because these — there are a lot of things that I strongly disagree with, but I think we can't afford to run away from them. We have to find a way to engage with them in ways that are respectful.

I mean, I think that's really the key, to keep the door as wide open as we can, but have rules about civility, about the way that it's conducted and that issue of civility, which is a great national preoccupation right now — deserves to be in front because the ability to have this discourse and be open to different ideas does depend on civility. I would just say, again as a historian, let's not kid ourselves, incivility has characterized our politics from the beginning, right?

EVANS: *(laughs)*

STEINBERG: You know, anybody who studied the Civil War and remember the caning of Charles Sumner on the floor of the Congress and that was in the middle of our first hundred years, but even going back to the earliest days and the vitriol and the name-calling and the real, sort of, deep animus. So it's not a new phenomenon here, the problem of sustaining civility in our public life. And it is hard when people advocate views which are quite, you know, disturbing, but we have to find ways to be civil. And we have to find ways to have it be based on the canons of inquiry that we all believe in. Which is, it has to be evidence-based, it has to be, you know, based on reasoning and logic, and not just a debating thing. Universities are not op-ed pages of newspapers, right? Anything can be published in an op-ed newspaper, there is a requirement here that it's more than just opinion. For the academic community, who's going to be members of this community, it has to be people who are committed to the basic principles of reasoning, of inquiry, of evidence-based analysis, but within that we just have to make sure that we keep the doors as wide as we can.

EVANS: That's what I see our role is as a university; that's what I see our role as in public policy schools, and I see our role as exposing students to that so they're practiced and they start building their muscle of,

you know, discretion and understanding here where it's a safe environment to make mistakes. But we have to be able to expose students to things that are difficult, to things that are confusing, to things that they may not always agree with, they're uncomfortable with — and if we don't do that, I think we really do fail as educators.

STEINBERG: Right. And you talked earlier about the important building coalitions and things like that. I mean what I always tell my students is that, "You are never going to find yourself, once you leave the campus, even if you weren't in the campus environment, in a like-minded group. You're going to be constantly dealing with people who have different views, different analysis, and you're going to have to find a way to work through that. I mean everything can't be, you know, a fist fight. You're going to have to find ways to work with people who have different perspectives, who have a different set of interests, a different set of priorities — and if you don't learn how to do that when you're a student, when are you going to learn?"

EVANS: Right, and you need to seek them out. So even if they don't come across your path, you need to seek them out because that's the best kind of policy is understanding the consequences and the implications for lots of different audiences. So doing that as well. Well, Jim, it has been such a pleasure. This is a very wonderful-- there's a lot of wisdom in what you're saying, and I do hope that we're able to work together to succeed in this. It's a big deal.

STEINBERG: It's very important, but I think that, you know, the missions of these schools are very important to me because they are fundamentally about civic engagement. And, you know, and that's what makes our students so special and that's why we enjoy so much engagement because they have this sense of civic responsibility and, you know, we at the Maxwell School all repeat the Athenian oath when we graduate our students about making our city more beautiful than we found it. And so that spirit is what brings I think all of us as teachers to these schools, what brings our students to these schools, and I think we just have to keep true to that mission and adapt it to the world that we live in today.

EVANS: Thank you, and I hope everyone who's listening, you know, [understands] that we're very, very fortunate in this country to have people like Jim and other educators who are devoted to students and devoted to ensuring that our students get the best education, the best exposure, the best skill sets that they can so that — like Jim said at the very beginning, not just for when they leave our school immediately, but for their long-term career trajectories, wherever that may take them. Thank you, again, so much, Jim.

STEINBERG: Great, terrific, great to be here. Thank you.

(guitar music)

NARRATOR: This is "Policy on Purpose," a podcast produced by the LBJ School of Public Affairs at the University of Texas at Austin. We take you behind the scenes of policy, with the people who help shape it. To learn more, visit LBJ.utexas.edu and follow us on Twitter or Facebook at the LBJ School. Thank you for listening.

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