



## POLICY ON PURPOSE

Episode 17: Susan M. Gordon, Principal Deputy Director of National Intelligence

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**ANGELA EVANS:** Hello everyone, this is Angela Evans, the dean of the LBJ School, and this is “Policy on Purpose,” another podcast where we're interviewing really amazing people who've spent their careers in public service and working for the public good. And I am so, so pleased to have Susan Gordon with me today. An amazing woman — I just met her a few minutes ago and I feel like I've known her for a long time.

**SUSAN GORDON:** Yeah, sisters.

**EVANS:** Exactly. Susan holds a very, very critical position in our government. She's the principal deputy director of national intelligence. In that position she is responsible for coordinating all of the intelligence in the United States that's gathered — and abroad — to make sure, and I'll read you the mission: The mission, her mission, is to lead intelligence integration and forge an intelligence community that delivers the most insightful intelligence possible. So think about that. When you're starting to think about not only lofty goals, but really critical goals, this is so fundamental to what we do as a government and as a people. So I'm so happy to have you here, Sue.

**GORDON:** I'm delighted to be here Angela; thanks for having me.

**EVANS:** Good. I can't wait to get this going. When I was thinking about this — you're very innovative, you've done a lot of innovative things. Even 20 years ago you started to think about how you can get government to work with business, and how to create energy and new ideas. So you've been able to thread the needle between government and the private sector very

well, and at a time now we're sort of into — do we really trust government, do we really trust the private sector, especially in intelligence. Talk to me a little bit about what you've seen as changes over those years that you've been trying to do this in an innovative way. What are some of the tensions that you constantly keep running up against?

**GORDON:** First, I think I'm purposely obtuse, in that I only care about getting the job done. So I think that's always led me to look at partnership, and public-private partnership as one of my favorite. I think if you look at government in the private sector, in the national security arena, we've kind of had an arc — if you think about it, during World War II, when the FFRDCs, the federally funded research and development centers, were really coming into being. Our idea of that was we needed to get private sector talent and hold it for government use, so bring it in to an entity and have it available.

Then you get to the 1970s and skunkworks, where we really needed to be innovative in what we were building, and the private sector was really good at that, so we held the intellectual property but the private sector came up with the solutions to it.

Then we move into the information age, and we had this burgeoning energy out of Silicon Valley and the private sector and information, and they didn't want to give their intellectual property away. But we still needed their energy to combine with our deeper pockets and purpose, and so In-Q-Tel was born, and the idea was, they're going to hold the intellectual property, and what the government is going to do is keep ideas around long enough so that they become commercially available. Because if you just had commercial forces acting on them, some good ideas wouldn't come into existence because they weren't going to be commercially viable. If we saw them as interesting we would keep them alive long enough with funding so they could prove out to be something.

So now, fast-forward to today, what's the nature of public-private partnership today, and I think one of the ideas that we have to embrace is: If the strength of America is in the private sector, our adversaries have realized that that's also the threat surface. But who's the one that's going to lead then? So do we now have to look at public-private partnership in terms of the private sector taking responsibility for leadership and decision-making and the government supporting the private sector?

**EVANS:** That's such an interesting idea there, because that's exactly what the question is really.

**GORDON:** Right.

**EVANS:** You have to pinpoint that pivot where — it's a pivot. Even in our psyche, in our American psyche, that's going to be hard for some people to give up.

**GORDON:** Right, so think about how it started is, World War II is a private sector supporting government. Because we were the ones making all the big decisions. Now the way the world has unfolded with industry and global power, does the role change?

**EVANS:** It does.

**GORDON:** And then, is the private sector ready to lead, and make different decisions? And is the government ready to support them in that decision-making? I think so — I think that's where we're going, and we're somewhere on that journey.

**EVANS:** I think this is a problem for us who are trying to prepare the next generation, because we can't prepare them in traditional ways. There are several of the deans of public policy schools that have gotten together and said the political landscape is different, the relationship between the public and private is different, information has exploded — so how do you train students to understand what's good information and what isn't good information? So we're in a transition place here, and whatever we do right now with schools is either going to help lead that transition, or it's not going to make any contribution at all. At best it'd be neutral. So we don't want to be neutral; we want to help lead it. But I can't quite see in my mind what we need to be doing in our schools — how do we prepare our students for this kind of thinking?

**GORDON:** I have a thought.

**EVANS:** Good, let's hear it.

**GORDON:** It's predicated on the notion of, if you believe my story, and it's probably more theory than rule —

**EVANS:** But it kind of resonates. I think it aligns with what we've been thinking about.

**GORDON:** Yeah, maybe. Feeling, right?

**EVANS:** Yes.

**GORDON:** Is, the tent of national security is really huge. Because it's kind of all of us. And it's not a small protectionist thing; it's just, how do we make sure that our interests, and free, safe, reliable, can promulgate? So the tent's really huge, so I think we need to prepare everyone the same way, and here's what I would say if I were preparing students today.

The first thing I would tell them is, spend a lot of time seeing the world clearly. Pick your head up. History is really useful, but it is not a great framework, because conditions have changed so much. So really see the world for what it is, and what forces are acting. Our history was mostly political-economic; now I would say in a digitally connected world, economic forces are. And so how do you see the world and understand it, and think about that? So whether you're a political scientist, or international relations, or computer science, see the world clearly.

The second is, this is a technical world. We cannot long for simpler times. No one is going to be able to escape being a competent data swimmer and to be able to use technology — and again, the same thing. So invest in your education of being competent with technology and competent

with data, because it's so abundant, so available — and if you can use it, any discipline advances.

**GORDON:** Then the last we'd say — first I'd tell everyone to be a reader, and to hone your fundamental curiosity, because in a world where technology becomes a commodity, critical thinking will dominate. So if you train your students to be those things, and those are layered on top of any of the disciplines they pursue, we're going to be OK.

**EVANS:** This makes me feel really good, because one of the things we've been talking about is precisely that. One of the things we've talked about is experiential — it's just not here, it's not time-bound by a semester, 15-hour courses, it's about how you take what you learn and see here, and see it and test it in the real world. So part of what we're thinking about is, how do you integrate and blend those kinds of experiences while students are still studying? Getting them some lessons in hard knocks, when you go out there it's not like what you think it's going to be. Our students are wonderful, but they come to us with opinions. You think OK, nobody really cares about your opinion really, but how they care about your measured conclusion after you study things. So that hit.

And the data is absolutely critical, because putting data sets together and looking at metadata — and some of the work you did when you were with the GIS, when you were working with geospatial, was critical, and I know when I was at CRS we used this. It's telling a story with a picture, and also looking at what that can tell us, and it reveals things that you would never know if you just had data.

**GORDON:** Yeah, so anything put in the context of space and time is more understandable.

**EVANS:** Exactly. And it tells a narrative, and again, trying to help people understand what that narrative is. And I'm so glad you talked about reading, and I would add to that writing, because writing does really reflect your ability to rationally present an argument. But these are things that we're working on now, and a lot of schools are working on this and trying to figure out how we deliver this. I'm so pleased that you said that.

**GORDON:** Yeah. One of the questions that I — Actually, I have two questions that I encourage people to ask. One: What if we could? Most people correct that into, "We can." I'm like, no, the possibility is the far more interesting construct. Because it's just like, what if we could, I don't know, transport ourselves between here and there in no time. That would be amazing. The other question is: Oh, you wanted it to work?

**EVANS:** Exactly.

**GORDON:** Putting things into use tends to be a great discriminant of the value of information.

**EVANS:** Absolutely. The feasibility and the relevance and the timeliness. You can have great ideas but nobody can implement them.

**EVANS:** You and I both grew up in agencies, and we worked in different parts of agencies, and we committed ourselves to those. I think this generation of students is more likely to move around, and what I really liked about some of the things that you were saying in some of the different interviews that I listened to was, we should really attract students to come to the government first, and then go out and say, we don't need you to be spending 40 years here; go out into the private sector, understand the context of what it means to be in a national policy stream, make your mark, and then come back when you're tired — well, [when] you're wise.

**GORDON:** You're wise.

**EVANS:** You're wise and you have that. So talk to me a little bit about that, because that just resonated with me, especially with this generation of students.

**GORDON:** I usually talk about it in context of, how are we going to track the same talent that is in such demand everywhere into government jobs? And whether that's because there's still this trust gap, or there's a pay gap, or it takes a long time to get a security clearance. What I say is, I can compete head-up with anyone for someone's first five years. If you work in the government and national security you will have higher purpose and more responsibility than anywhere else. What happens in about five years is, you're not feeling all excited and you want to go someplace and the bureaucracy kicks in. It used to be OK because we did the coolest stuff and had the only talents in certain areas, and now that mathematical talent that used to only apply to cryptology now is actually relevant to cybersecurity, and so there are more people that want our talents. So as we kind of bog down there are other places that want them, and so we tend to lose talent. So how do we construct this stream that says, OK that's not just happening to us, how do I use it?

I think that goes into the fact that this is a world of expertise, not experts. When I started we had experts who did the same job for 30 years, and they were really good. Jobs aren't going to be around for 30 years, but I need expertise that can be applied to a lot of different jobs. You develop expertise differently, and I think that's that in-and-out. How do you see that same skill from a different angle doing it a different way? I think there are some really mutually supporting ideas that will fit with the way our youngsters want to execute their career, and I think it's exactly what we need now. We just have to develop the mechanisms to allow them to move in and out.

**EVANS:** The how is always the big question.

**GORDON:** Yep. But if you want it we can figure out the how.

**EVANS:** I agree, and I think there's some people who will never come there, and then there's some people who, we can say that and they'll take us to the next level, and our job is to take those in the middle and to make sure they're the ones that take us to the next level.

**GORDON:** Mm-hmm (*affirmative*).

**EVANS:** I think one of the things that we have to overcome is that our students are taught, and they have exposure to people in the policy arena and in the public administration arena, that are of a different age. So blending those ages in an environment that allows this kind of — it's really a trust level that you have between the public and the private sector and the way they work — it's a challenge, because it's everything.

**GORDON:** Right.

**EVANS:** So it's not just what we think, it's like they're going into organizations that have a structure, that have a culture, that have tacit understanding, and it's how you shift all of those so that the environment they go into is ripe for them to contribute and change.

**GORDON:** Yeah, and I don't think there's anything more stark right now than the kind of tussle that the Department of Defense is having with Google, right? So you have the culture of the defense and the national security community, which is very, "We're the good guys, we keep America safe," and you have Google, which is advancing our technical wherewithal in really exciting ways that are really useful, and we want these two things to come together. But the culture of the Googles doesn't see the culture of national security in the same way it sees itself. Now me, I think we're in the same business: Use knowledge for good. But that is a pretty hard connection to make because you're so culturally different, and so how are we going to build that trust to allow it? Because I think there is good mutual benefit, and it probably is, I don't require either to have to be the other to find ways for them to be mutually beneficial.

**EVANS:** I think that speaks a lot to the leadership in the Googles, and in the Facebooks. The leadership has to understand this, and their workforce. Because one of the things I loved, I read this, is, and I'm going to quote you: "As AI advances and becomes more important to the military and intelligence community, and as Silicon Valley continues its reckoning with the real world uses and impacts of its products, it's an open question whether those partnerships can continue to grow." And here's your quote: "One of the key things about Google is, I think, it's adorable that they have morals now when they're using technology that the Department built for them. That's cute." That's what you said. "But we've always done this together."

I just thought that was one of the best quotes. Because you see this and you say, are the leadership of these folks getting it? And the type of leaders they are within their institutions, are they ready to move people when people don't want to be moved particularly in that direction? So this gets into the leadership issue as well. So somebody like you, who's got these creative visions and makes it happen, and you see these connections — you have to have a partner in the private sector who can align with you. And right now you know better than I do — I see that's not quite there yet.

**GORDON:** Yeah, so one handy tip to everyone who's being interviewed: The interview isn't over when you think it is. That line was actually the last line I said in an interview.

**EVANS:** Was the mic off when you said it? Is that the type of thing you were saying?

**GORDON:** No, I thought we were done. We had this great interview with the very awesome editorial staff of *Wired*, and it was such a fun two hours, and we were just talking. It kind of started with arms folded, and then it was really interesting, and proving the point that there is energy and excitement everywhere. That's why my tent is big. But we kind of wrapped up and then someone said that, and so I said that line, and it really is what I believe. But what I would have also said is, but I believe in America. I can wait.

In other words, it is important to me that Google keep advancing, because the advance, even without being direct partners, is good for us. That's what's exciting about America compared to some of our competitors who would knock it down. I would rather them be able to see their way to partner, I would rather them see that national security is not the way they narrowly interpret it, I would rather that they see that technology isn't evil, that the cool thing about working with the United States government is that we all swear to uphold and defend the Constitution of the United States.

**EVANS:** Constituent.

**GORDON:** Which is slightly different than what China does. I would rather they see that, but I would also rather us be living in a country where they can make that choice, and still advance, and it lifts all boats. I just think that they need to see what they're part of, and if they could see what they were part of, kind of the private sector taking a bit more leadership and responsibility, they would see that there were parting opportunities.

**EVANS:** I think I'm optimistic that they will.

**GORDON:** Me too.

**EVANS:** But I'm glad I said that, because this way you can clarify that too.

**GORDON:** Yeah. But I also believe that. I mean, come on.

**EVANS:** Yeah. And also you don't really know, we don't know, people don't know what goes behind closed doors and discussions, like in Congress or in the executive branch; we don't know really what kinds of things are being said. But I want to get to another thing that worries me, and that is: We have a leader like you, and let's say you retire. That force of nature, that catalyst that sits in the middle of all of this, and you go away — how do you grow the sustainability of your energy, your vision, your relationships, when you leave?

**GORDON:** I believe in America. This is really going to sound cheesy, and I'm so sorry, it just happens to be what I believe. I think we're all supposed to serve our term, and with each job I've had, I've tried to do everything with it that allows every place it can go, and to take it. I have a great mom and dad who raised me up right, who taught me to do my best and give something for the cause, and I try and do that every day. I think I've become someone who people see as — [who] leans forward, takes some risks.

**EVANS:** They do, yes.

**GORDON:** What's cool about that is, the reason why I can do that, is because I know my women and men will never let me down. And so I don't actually worry much about the day when I'm not there, because if I've done it right, I've given what I was supposed to give. But they're still there, and going to follow along. I think the one thing I do try and do now is to convince people that they can believe. I think that's my super power: I believe. And I believe we can do anything, I believe that we're fundamentally good, I believe that energy triumphs over bureaucracy, and I believe that individuals make a difference. And what I try and do, in a time that is way too cynical, way too worried, way too fraught, way too bound — I try and be someone who says, "No, we can do that." And I try and, not show them that because I'm special, but whether I reflect all the awesome things we've done in the past, and to remind them that all those things are there for them as well. So I don't worry about leaving, because hopefully I've done my job right, served my term, and set the condition where they can step into it.

**EVANS:** Exactly, that's fundamental. Because then it's an acceptance of, they engage in it in their own way.

**GORDON:** Mm-hmm (*affirmative*).

**EVANS:** Having an exemplar is really important. Having someone they can see and work with, and somebody who takes risks, and somebody who makes things happen, you really can't minimize that. I understand your answer, but I think it's really important people work with and under and for people like you. Because people then see that it can actually work, and they can see, we made a mistake here, we had a really great challenge here. It's a way of passing, it's sort of a tacit way of passing the way you try to lead, and the way you try to collaborate, to folks, and they can put their own pawprint on it after you leave. I think that's really important for those of us in positions to make sure that we're always aware of what you just said.

**GORDON:** Yeah. That's a good point. I actually had a really seminal experience early in my career, where I was given a really huge responsibility that was well beyond anyone's right to expect that I could do it. It was a huge task, and it required innovation, and I did that, delivered a really innovative solution for under cost in a very short amount of time, and I screwed it up. Because I came up with a technical solution but I didn't understand the politics and resources and all the things that you need to. It was awful. My lack of understanding of all the things that you need to do to make something happen, because I just thought about the thing I was developing, actually caused a guy to sell his company and do all the things, and we got in organizational trouble.

When I went to my boss and told them about this failure, my boss said to me — and I was changed after he said this — he said, "I've seen worse." I thought, *what?*

**EVANS:** What? I've just done this! This is major!



**GORDON:** I know. I'm the most self-critical person in her life and I'm thinking, the free world is going to end and my boss said "I've seen worse." And in a flash I saw two things. No. 1, because he was so good, he could give me a hard task, let me do it completely, I delivered innovation, and there was nothing so bad that he couldn't accomplish it. I thought, OK, I'm going to learn to be much better at my job, and see all those things. And then I want to be the boss that can always say to my people, "I've seen worse." Because what that allows is just incredible achievement. It means you have to be good at your job, so I try and be good at my job, but then I try and let go. And so it turns out, from my worst failure in my career, I learned the one lesson that I think has changed me, which is: I've seen worse.

**EVANS:** This is interesting, because several people that we've had on the podcast, who people say, "*That* person has failed? No." There's always this trajectory and smooth road. And they have, and they've shared with us on the podcast: "I got fired, or this happened, or I did this," and it was a moment that they said — first of all it was a jolt, it was a humbling experience, because I was so myopic, or I was just thinking about this.

**GORDON:** Yeah, I just didn't see the world.

**EVANS:** It doesn't see the world. But people who — the mistake was made in that environment — were forgiving, and just said, "That's the way it goes, and if you're willing to work hard and learn from this, on we go." Because I think so many people think it's just — first they think they can't make a mistake. And second, they just don't take the risk. If they think that they're going to be admonished for a mistake they won't take the risk. So this fits into some of the other exemplars we've had here.

**GORDON:** And what didn't my boss do? He didn't say, "Give me the work, I'll do it from here."

**EVANS:** Yeah, or, "I'm not going to give you something like that again."

**GORDON:** Right, that's the cool thing: "Didn't see that coming Sue, we've got to do this," and it went forward. I just think those are important stories to tell. It's important that we develop leaders who can do that, that had hard experiences young. I think that's one of the things that I wish I'd said earlier to one of your questions, is I worry that, for as amazing our people coming up are — and I will tell you, if they keep coming we're going to be OK.

**EVANS:** I agree.

**GORDON:** Right, just fundamentally. I do think sometimes they think that if it's hard, it's not right. It's all hard.

**EVANS:** It's always hard, yeah.

**GORDON:** It's all hard.

**EVANS:** Yes.

**GORDON:** And so don't think that just because it's hard, it's not right. And I will tell you, the best things are achieved because you could live with the mess long enough for it to be manifest. If you need it to be neat too early, you won't get to the big thing. That would be my one big thing, is [that] it's all hard.

**EVANS:** Yes, it is. And if it's not hard, often it's not worth it. Because when it comes to things at your level, that means that things couldn't be resolved in levels below you. So when it comes, as you move up into that stream of leadership, they become not that clear. The tensions are not that clear, or where are you going to go. So having that is really an important message.

Sue, I've really enjoyed this. Is there anything else you'd like to say? Most of the people who are listening to this, and the way I do this is for our students, so that those who couldn't meet you in person would get to hear what you had to say — I wish people could see you and meet you. You're just such an incredibly normal wonderful person. You just exude energy and optimism, and I wish students could get to know you. But if they can't, is there anything you'd like to leave us with?

**GORDON:** I think what I'd tell them is — and usually this is my sales pitch for intelligence community — but actually I think it's just my sales pitch for life right now: Do something that matters. And it hardly matters what it is, and you don't have to race to your future. I wish I'd known when I started that my 30s weren't the whole part of my life. Here I am at 60 with nearly 40 years in, and I can think of another whole career's worth of work to do. So don't race to your future, but also don't waste a minute of what you're in, and do something that matters. I think you'll be happy, and I think you'll take us somewhere, and both those things are really important.

**EVANS:** Amen. Sue, thank you so much for the time that you spent with us. I so appreciate it.

**GORDON:** I've loved it.

**EVANS:** Yes.

**GORDON:** Hook 'em, Horns.

**EVANS:** Hook 'em, Horns.

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