Policy on Purpose

Episode 8: Admiral William McRaven

(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: This is Angela Evans — I'm the dean of the LBJ school, and I'm really happy to welcome you to our eighth podcast, and I'm very pleased to have with me Admiral McRaven. And Admiral McRaven is just incredible. I was looking up, you know, the rank of the admiral, four-star admiral, and there's only a little over 200 in the history of the United States. So this is not only — this is a great achievement, but this is a great honor for me.

ADMIRAL WILLIAM McRAVEN: Thanks.

EVANS: And then I was also thinking about another person who was in the Navy. So the Navy grows these really incredible people — Sen. McCain.

McRAVEN: Absolutely.

EVANS: And I had the pleasure of working with him. And he was a patriot and very much of a maverick and an independent thinker. And then now we have you here, and we have the pleasure of having you here at the LBJ School. We're so, so pleased about that.

McRAVEN: Well thanks, Angela. I will tell you, just to be mentioned in the same sentence as John McCain is an honor. I also had an opportunity to work with him quite a bit when I was both a three-star and a four-star — just you know, the finest example of an American, an American patriot, an American hero. I mean, all the right words frankly apply to John McCain. Also a great sense of humor.

EVANS: Yes.

McRAVEN: And quite a character, and of course as with all naval officers and senior officers, you have a special bond. And there's not a single person I know in the service that didn't respect him greatly.

EVANS: Yes.

McRAVEN: So we've lost a true American hero.

EVANS: And he's left us an incredible legacy.

McRAVEN: He has.

EVANS: Which is really a wonderful thing. There are so many of your achievements, but I decided today really I would focus on some of the achievements you have in education and in policy. So I just want to say a few things. I don't know if people know this, you created and launched the Special Operations/Low-Intensity Conflict curriculum — a curriculum — when you were a student at the Naval Postgraduate School, and that's still used today.

McRAVEN: Yes.

EVANS: So that's one thing. You authored a book on special operations, and you highlighted the principles needed for successful military operations. So here's another way to impart your knowledge that I don't know if people know about that. You're a recognized authority in U.S. foreign policy, and an adviser to presidents and world leaders. And this foreign policy — people see you sort of in these military kinds of hats, but the foreign policy is so important to be a really good military leader as well. In 2012, Foreign Policy magazine named you one of the top 10 foreign policy experts, and one of the top 100 global thinkers. And then you served as a chancellor of The University of Texas system, and now we have you here at the LBJ School as a professor. So it's really clear that you've devoted a lot of your life to educational pursuits, but also being in the policy in the arena, and that's a really important combination for me today.

So since our podcast is called "Policy on Purpose," one of the things I wanted to talk to you about is throughout your life, you have found purpose, and you have been directed by it. So I have three questions around purpose. One is: Can you tell us the importance of finding purpose in life, and can you describe challenges that you've faced when that purpose was challenged? And also, how do you think we can best prepare those in policy education to determine their purpose and to stand by it through thick and thin? So it's really a purpose question. Or set of questions.

McRAVEN: Well I mean, I think everybody needs a purpose in life. I think what surprises a lot of people is they start off with one purpose, thinking this is the path that life is going to take them down. And then opportunities present themselves, life changes, and then the next thing you know, they're on a different path. In my case, I had — frankly, I had wanted to be a track coach at one point in time when my grades were, shall we say, having some difficulties at The University of Texas.

EVANS: *(laughing)*

McRAVEN: But also, I wanted to be a marine biologist. I —- growing up as a kid, I loved Jacques Cousteau, I loved the idea of being on the sea, I loved the idea of diving. I started scuba diving when I was 13 years old in Canyon Lake, and then out in the Gulf Coast. And so I thought I wanted to be a marine biologist. Well, I got the water part right, but at some point in time things around me began to change and I decided I wanted to be a Navy SEAL. And this idea of having a purpose to be a Navy SEAL really kind of set me on the path to make sure I was physically in shape, that I understood everything about demolitions, and weapons, and the sort of things you need to be able to get through SEAL training. And then once I got through SEAL training, I will — you know, and this may not be the right lesson for every one of your listeners — I don't know that my event horizon was too far. I wasn't looking

at being a Navy SEAL admiral, and in fact at the time when I came into the SEALs in 1977, there were no SEAL admirals. So all I really wanted to do was to be a SEAL platoon commander. And a platoon is really the kind of smallest combat element of a SEAL team, and this was where you did most of your training, this is where you had your best leadership opportunities at the time I was going through. So that became my purpose. And it drove me for several years to be the very best I could at what I was doing. So you have to be good at what you're doing if you want to continue to progress, and I think that will help drive the purpose.

I think today what I've seen, certainly with some of my children, but with other students I've met, is they look way down the road. And they want to kind of figure out how life is going to — or how they're going to shape their life to be something 20 years from now. I can *almost* guarantee them that whatever they plan to be 20 years from now, they will probably be something else. So you know, you really have to kind of look at I think a shorter event horizon, figure out what your purpose is in that short event horizon, and then drive hard toward that purpose.

EVANS: Mhmm. So one of the things that we talk about here is people getting off track. So there is the need to have a trajectory and a purpose, and then sometimes people think like, well, it's not a choice of that I'm going to do a new career, the trajectory I'm on, I've got challenges.

McRAVEN: Right.

EVANS: So how do you meet those challenges? So in your case some of these could've been physical challenges, or psychological challenges, or competitive challenges, or something. But you know, the drive to stay on purpose. So can you talk just a little bit about how –

McRAVEN: I can. So the... As I mentioned, I always wanted to be initially a SEAL platoon commander. But early on in my career, I was given this great opportunity to go be a leader in a very elite SEAL team. Well, I got fired from this particular SEAL team.

EVANS: You did.

McRAVEN: I did.

EVANS: There you go. So –

McRAVEN: It did not go well. And the commanding officer relieved me of my SEAL squadron — or team as we called them back then — relieved me of that position, and I was sent to another command. Well, that's about as bad as it gets. So [while] it's never good to get fired, it's particularly bad to be fired in the Navy. But at that point in time, I had to say OK, is my purpose still something I think is important? And frankly it helped my wife, you know, kind of pick me up, dusted me off, and said, "Look, you've never quit at anything in your life. Now is not the time to quit. If you feel strongly about continuing, then we need to get over this hurdle and press forward." And we did. You know, I rebounded and my next job I rebuilt my reputation. And as time went on — and it did take some time. I mean again, any time you go through something as dramatic and as almost personally embarrassing as that is, it takes a while to rebuild your confidence and to put you on the right path. Sometimes that takes people around you to help you do that.

EVANS: Yes, exactly.

McRAVEN: And so, but it also — back to your point about purpose. It also kind of forces you to make sure that your purpose — you have to evaluate your purpose. Was my purpose in life really something that overcoming this challenge was going to be worthwhile to achieve that purpose? And my answer was yes. And so having that purpose, having the challenge that I was facing, figuring out how to overcome that challenge was important. But at the end of the day it was about making sure the purpose was right and that it was worth all the hard work that was going to be put into it to achieve it.

EVANS: I think this is an important discussion, because a lot of our students think about a failure as something that — they can't get up from it. Or they take it too personally, and they don't think about the ultimate goal, you know? And part of — I worry about a little bit about people being too thin-skinned, and you know, getting off track. So this is a really important statement you made. And also having support structures around. So if it's not your spouse, or you know, a family member, or a friend, or a community that can help you really figure it out. You have to think it through, so this is — thank you for that — that story.

McRAVEN: Sure.

EVANS: The other thing I want to talk about with you is that some of the challenges we face at a policy school in particular, where we have two years with students, sometimes three if they're taking a dual degree, if they're studying another discipline, is that we get — we're very, very technically oriented. We want them to have technical information, oftentimes it's very precise, and it's very discipline-specific. And so you and I have had discussions outside of this about how we start teaching students larger frameworks of the way to think about things. How do you think and act in a strategic way, or — I like this new word — in a principled way, you know? You've got some kind of a framework to think about this. And I think we owe that, especially to our students who are in policy. We have to bring a lot of disciplines together to attack a problem. So when we're thinking about that, talk to me a little bit about how you think in a strategic way in terms of the principles you set up that your actions have to — or actions of those that you lead have to fulfill those principles. And then how you use information, especially if you don't have the best information that you need. And then how you delegate and how you collaborate. Because I'm — when we were talking about this, this is a lot of what we're trying to bring to the students in terms of those frameworks.

McRAVEN: Okay, let me — I'm going to break it down here to a couple of different categories. So let's talk a little bit about kind of the education of a student who is — who's trying to develop a public policy or a national security, you know, background, and be a player in that arena. I think you have to have some fundamental pieces that are going to make you viable wherever you go. One, you have to have good writing skills. Interestingly enough, coming up in the elevator to meet with you a few minutes ago, I heard some students in the elevator talking about the critical writing — or the writing class they were taking, and how challenging it was. Good on them. I mean, you have to have a challenging writing course. You have to be able to convey your ideas and your thoughts. You have to be able to do so clearly, succinctly. So writing I think is a fundamental piece of whatever you decide to do. People often laugh about the fact that I was a journalism major here at The University of Texas. And they say, "Well, obviously that didn't help you much in the military." And I say *au contraire*. The fact of the matter is it was essential to my ability to write briefs, which you do in the military just about every day — you have to craft briefs you have to write point papers, you have to get your plan across, your message across, your position across. So I think writing is fundamental.

Critical thinking is the other aspect of — again, I think any discipline you go into you have to be able to think critically. I'm not sure a lot of people understand what that means, but it really is this idea that we've got to be able to look at the information and not just take it, you know, based on the facts, but look at things interdisciplinary, be able to apply those to a particular problem set, and then come up with, you know, a number of solutions. Not just one solution, because there's invariably a couple of solutions to a problem set. But this idea to be able to think critically, I think, is also important. So writing skills, briefing skills, critical thinking skills. I think those are fundamental to whatever you are going to do.

Now, as you begin to move forward — let's take it on the military side. For me, again, it gets back to your baseline skill set has got to be very good. So if you're a Navy SEAL, then you need to know how to shoot your weapons right, you need to understand demolition, you need to be able to jump out of an airplane, you've got to be able to lock out of submarines. You have to be good at all of the critical skill sets in — again, in your career field. Then from there, you can begin to build upon that and go from, well, I have my tactical skills, as we say, now I need to have my operational skills. So now this becomes planning at an operational level. And then as you get more senior, you develop strategic skills, looking more broadly across not only the military, but we like to talk about, you know, DIME; your **d**iplomatic, your **i**nformation, your **m**ilitary and your **e**conomic. So when the military looks at a problem set, or when military planners look at a problem set, they apply these — this framework of DIME to everything. Certainly senior officers do. Because when you're in Iraq and Afghanistan, you absolutely know, for example, that the problems you're dealing with, they're — the military piece of this is a small piece. So as we were beginning to work with the village elders in Afghanistan, you would ask yourself a number of things. So clearly there was a security component of it. That was kind of the military component of it. But what was the economic component? How were we going to incentivize the elders not to affiliate themselves with the Taliban? Well, you incentivize them through making sure that you provide them resources to have schoolhouses, to have clean water. You also have to look at the diplomatic piece as you're dealing with, again, the provincial leaders and the district leaders. And then the information piece, always about understanding what's happening around you. So this gets back to — you have to have the fundamentals, but then the more senior you get, you've got to be able to broaden your horizon in terms of understanding a whole lot of problem sets around you.

When you mentioned earlier on in the podcast that, you know, somebody had given me the moniker of you know, the top 10 national security experts. And I will tell you, I don't think that's unusual for senior military officials. Because as a senior officer, you are dealing with heads of state. So [I] routinely dealt with, you know, the king of Jordan and the prime minister of Iraq and the prime minister of Afghanistan. And you know, these are the sort of things that you deal with as a senior officer in the military. And you begin to understand and develop a better framework and principles for dealing with national security. So, not unusual at all. In terms of the principles for moving forward, again I would say if you take the military context of you have to have the basic skill set. So if you're in public policy, understand the fundamentals of public policy. Understand it at the city level, the state level, you know, and the national level. Understand that well. Get your discipline to the point where you were an expert in your field, and then begin to take that and become a little bit more of a generalist at the operational level and then the strategic level.

EVANS: I think these are really important points, because one of the things — the first thing you talked about was writing. Because not only is it a communication skill, it's a critical thinking skill. Because if you can write well, you know that someone's thinking logically.

McRAVEN: Correct.

EVANS: Also it's a way to communicate in a very efficient and effective way. And so we spend a lot of time on writing. And our students, in policy writing, brief writing, where you know, where they're very used to undergrad writing large research papers — well it's lots of footnotes, lots of passive voice, complex compound sentences. And so retraining people to be very direct. That's important. And critical thinking the way you defined it. The challenge for us is how do you see that in a lot of the different courses so that over — so over the whole curriculum and over the two years they're here, you're giving that to them in a lot of different ways. And I think you've hit on it, and what I really like about; it — it's aligning to where we're going-- is that give them the actually basic skills, and make sure they leave here understanding analytics and policy analysis, and you know, metadata, and how to design research, and looking at the methodologies. But then, where do you take it? You have to start taking that up a notch. So you give them a toolkit, but they have to be able to take that toolkit and apply it in different setting. And those settings come with experience.

McRAVEN: Absolutely.

EVANS: So another thing we talked about a little bit before we had the podcast is, how do students take the advantage of opportunities that come their way, and take the risk to say, "I'm on this trajectory, and people are telling me, 'Well maybe you shouldn't do that.'" But deep down you say, "Maybe I should." So talk a little bit about the risk-taking and the courage to step out of a lane that people expect you to be in to do something a little bit different.

McRAVEN: Yeah — Bob Gates, the former secretary of defense, former director of the CIA, used to tell this great story about when he was a young CIA officer. At one point in time the opportunity came up for him to go to the White House. The White House has got a small... two or three folks that work intelligence for the CIA in the White House. But his senior officers at the time told him, "That is a career killer. If you go do that, you will never be able to come back to Langley, you will never be an effective CIA officer, you're going to be kind of heading down the political path." But Gates said he was interested in doing that, he thought the risk was worthwhile. And of course, you know, the punchline of the story is he comes back later on to be the director of the CIA. And the message there for college students, for graduates, for people in life, is that there are going to be opportunities that will come up. And it is always risky. It is easier to stay on the path, the known path, and the safe path. I would encourage people, when they see those opportunities, it can be risky, no question about it. But sometimes those risks, the return on the investment on those risks is well worth it.

We were talking before the podcast, and I had the great advantage when I became a SEAL of, you know, not necessarily worrying about my future. There were no SEAL admirals, so when I came in I had no expectations of being a SEAL admiral. I had the expectation, again, being this SEAL platoon commander, a fairly low-level position. But I'm a risk taker. I like to take risks. I like to take professional risks and personal risks. They didn't always work out, to my point about getting fired.

EVANS: Yeah.

McRAVEN: That was a risk. I had a lot of people tell me, "Don't go do that." And I went and did it, and I failed. And so you move back quickly and now you have to reassess. But failure is part of life. And I will tell you, that was probably the best experience I had even though I failed. Because one, I had to reassess

my own, as I said, my confidence, and did I have the right purpose. But also, nothing steels you for combat and difficult times quite like failure. And I failed a lot in my career, and I assumed a lot of risks that didn't always turn out right. But in the end the risks far outweighed, you know, the failures, in terms of the trajectory of my career. So I would encourage young students and older students to accept those risks. Try them. More times than not they will work in your favor. Because other people will look at those risks and not be the people that want to move in that direction. And that direction could be the exact direction that will take you to where you want to go.

EVANS: I think one of the things too about taking a risk and failing is it not — it helps you learn about yourself in terms of what you don't want to do, but it also helps you have humility. Because I think a lot of folks don't have that humility factor in what they do, and people can't really relate — in my opinion — people can't really relate to a person who doesn't have humility. It just means —

McRAVEN: Oh, it definitely humbles you. *(laughing)*

EVANS: It does, and I think it's a very important one for that reason too. It just helps you think like, wait a minute, I'm not such a hotshot. You know, like I can make mistakes, and I've got to start thinking about how I take those mistakes in and not make them again, but also like I'm not, you know, the king of the hill all the time or the queen of the hill all the time.

McRAVEN: Well, the other thing it helped me with, as I became a more senior officer, and I saw some of my young officers struggle and fail — my ability to go and talk to them and say, "I've been in your shoes. I was fired." And they were like, "Wait, but you're the boss, what do you mean you were fired?" When I was your age, I was fired. You now have to decide whether or not you think moving forward is worth it. But my ability to empathize with them as a result of my experience was incredibly helpful to me, again, as I became a senior officer.

EVANS: This is great. So we get this — kind of moves me in the direction of, you know, after you have all of these experiences, you've met a lot of people, you've been tested, you've tested other people, you get to relationships, right? This — because life gets down to relationships. So one of the things I want to talk to you about is trust. When you think about trust — first of all, how important is trust to you? And when trust is damaged, how do you repair that, or do you? When do you decide it's worth to repair and when do you decide, maybe this is not, this is too much. So we think about this rupture in trust and a lot of people are experiencing that now and will experience this — this is, sort of, a human experience, what do you do about that?

McRAVEN: Well, trust is critical, I think, in everything you do. There's a great book by Stephen Covey called "The Speed of Trust." And I had all of my senior officers read it because it was an important understanding of how trust works in business, how trust works in relationships — but you know, you can't move forward in an important mission or with an important goal unless you have the trust of the people around you, unless you engender trust and hopefully the people around you are trustworthy. But, I've had a number of times when the people that I trusted failed to uphold their end of the bargain. What I will tell you is I always try to rebuild that trust. Even if I have to be the person that goes furthest out to do that because frankly, I've been on the other side of it.

I recall one time in my life when I think I was the person that was not trustworthy. It was, you know, a momentary lapse with a colleague of mine and I regretted it forever, but it also gave me a perspective.

He lost trust in me as result of an event and I thought, "Well, I understand things now," and I'm — you know, I like to think I'm a good person, but even good people, you know, will make that mistake every once in a while. We rebuilt the trust and we continued on to do great things together. But that also kind of had me reflect on the people that made mistakes when I trusted them. Most people that make those mistakes, they're good people and they just make mistakes — not all of them, but most of them are. So I think it is important to go out of your way, even when somebody fails to be trustworthy, you try to rebuild that trust and you try to rebuild it as many times as you can. And I think that probably surprises people, you know, at what point in time do you just say, "You are no longer trustworthy." That'll be, you know —

EVANS: It's almost like an individual kind of a situation, you know.

McRAVEN: Yeah, I mean certainly some people you know, if they've been good friends for a long time and they have a slip-up, well then you give them a break and you move past it. If there's somebody that has a historical track record of being untrustworthy, well then, you know, you trust but verify it, I guess. *(laughs)*

EVANS: No, I think that's an important thing, because I think there's a lesson in that as well — because sometimes you may have a perception of why a person did something that then ended up to you think this person isn't trustworthy. But they have a whole different interpretation of it because, you know, sometimes you can't be inside of people's heads.

McRAVEN: Exactly right. Well, and again, this was the case with me was, I thought I was doing the right thing. In his eyes, I wasn't. And when I was able to look at it from his perspective and realized why he wasn't trusting me, it made perfect sense. And sometimes I think, you know, in dealing with people, you know, you like to think everybody's going to be upfront, but sometimes their motivations are different and you have to understand what those motivations are.

EVANS: Yes. Well this has been wonderful to have you here and it's going to be wonderful to have you here with the students for the simple reasons that everyone who's listening to this can understand. Because while we can make people experts in a discipline and knowledge-based, there's a whole set of human relationships, human interactions, self-discovery, courage, that you have to have. And for our students who are going into the policy arena, we like to talk about it in the arena, sort of like Teddy Roosevelt talked about — I looked it up actually and Teddy Roosevelt did a speech at the Sorbonne. He wrote it himself, it's like 16 pages and there's one paragraph that talks about the arena, but basically says, you know, if you're not in there, if you don't take this step and leap and you don't get bloodied, then you have no right to talk to other people about taking that stuff. So we —

McRAVEN: It's not the critic who counts. *(laughs)*

EVANS: Exactly. That's exactly right. So thank you so much —

McRAVEN: My pleasure,

EVANS: — Admiral McRaven for being with us today, and I'm so looking forward to having you as part of our community.

McRAVEN: Well thanks, Angela; it's great to be here and I'm looking forward to being a part of the LBJ School. Thanks.

EVANS: Thank you.

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