

Kelly Brownell:

Hello, welcome to Policy360. I am Kelly Brownell, the Dean of the Sanford school of public policy at Duke University. This is the second part of my conversation with Gene Dodaro. Gene is the nation's top fiscal watchdog, the Comptroller General of the United States and head of the US government accountability office. It's his job along with his colleagues to track down government waste and fraud, and they're very good at it. The GAO has saved government many billions of dollars. Well Gene, welcome and glad to have you here.

Gene Dodaro:

I'm very pleased to be here Kelly.

Kelly Brownell:

Last year, there was a major data breach affecting the records of millions of federal workers, and this was in the press a good bit. The GAO has raised a red flag about weaknesses and how the government protects sensitive data in its IT systems. In this inquiry that you've done, what were some of the major weaknesses you've found?

Gene Dodaro:

There is a recurring pattern of certain major weaknesses across the federal government. First, there's too many people have access to the information. There's not proper segregation of duties and responsibilities. So if changes are made to systems, that can be done. A lot can be controlled by one person rather than multiple people. There are not comprehensive security programs in place that we've seen for a number of years. Security patches aren't made in a timely manner in a number of cases. So there's a fundamental, has been for a number of years, lack of attention to computer security systems. One of the problems is that the information security needs to be built in into the design of a system in the beginning, and a lot of government systems now are legacy systems that have been around for decades, and so there wasn't proper attention years ago. Those systems continue to plague us, and the more interconnectivity you have with government systems operating with one another, the lowest common denominator can be your weakness to really enter into other government systems.

So there's interconnectivity problems and vulnerabilities that occur. We've been working on this for many, many years. I've been concerned about this information security for 20 years. We put it on our high risk list, which highlights areas across the entire federal government back in 1997, got Congress to pass laws that require annual assessments of computer security. We've issued literally hundreds, if not thousands of recommendations since then, and many have been implemented, but many haven't been and there just hasn't been enough high level attention to this issue with the OPM breach that you mentioned, it's getting more attention, but the government's ability to quickly make the changes necessary here because of the age of the systems is going to be a challenge.

Kelly Brownell:

Well given that you issued the warning so many years ago and pointed out how serious a breach could be, what do you attribute the lack of progress to and why aren't we where we need to be?

Gene Dodaro:

Yeah, quite frankly, it hasn't been a high enough priority on the part of policymakers over time. And it's emblematic of many issues where we raised issues early on, but you really don't get attention until

there's a major breakdown and an embarrassment, which happened in this case and threatened not only the privacy of the information, but national security concerns because of the depth and breadth of this particular security breach. So it's unfortunate. I think a lot of people have been trying to work on it, but it hasn't been given the proper oversight. And I think you'll see additional funding go to the area, but it has to be properly used in order to make the necessary corrective changes.

Kelly Brownell:

Would it be true that vast amounts of money would be needed in order to correct the problem because of the legacy systems that you mentioned?

Gene Dodaro:

Yeah there are two issues. There may be additional investments that are required for new tools, but there needs to be proper prioritization of the resources agencies already put into the systems. And in a lot of cases, some of these systems ought to be consolidated and closed. For example, we've pointed out that the federal government has well over 10,000 data centers. Many of them are not optimally used. They need to consolidate the data centers. They're moving to do that now and perhaps use cloud computing some more with more secure settings and services. So there's opportunities to use the \$80 billion investment every year the federal government makes in information technology. You could save money there that could be better spent in computer security and you could add some additional targeted investments.

Kelly Brownell:

So the GAO provides policy makers with foresight about emerging trends and challenges. We talked a little bit about this in our previous podcast, but the idea is for policy makers to think more strategically and address problems before they become crises. Could you mention perhaps some of the emerging trends that you're seeing that you think policymakers need to be especially alert to?

Gene Dodaro:

Yeah, sure. One area surprisingly people might know is water shortages. We did a survey of the water managers for 50 states. 40 of the 50 states in the next decade anticipate water shortages, either statewide or in significant regions in the state. So what we're trying to do is alert people to this problem. We've looked at use of water, for example, recently in hydraulic fracturing for Shell oil development, which uses a lot of water, but there are techniques that could be used to reduce the water. That's being done and recycle in some cases. We're looking at desalinization issues and other areas. Second is our nuclear power plants are aging. There hasn't been a lot of new nuclear power plants in place for a while. Nuclear energy policy needs to be discussed, but we're looking at the modular nuclear reactors and new technologies that are available that might provide safer technology, but there's the emerging issue of the accumulation of aggregate nuclear waste over time. We don't have a final repository for that issue as well.

Limiting the federal government's fiscal exposure to climate change is another emerging issue that I'm very concerned about, you know, the federal government's the largest property owner, landholder in the United States, owns 29% of all the land. We own a great deal of property, including defense installations and coastal areas that are already seeing some of the effects of climate change. Federal government's the insurer for crop insurance and the amount of money going into crop insurance has more than doubled in the last five years for government insurers, flood areas, and right now the flood insurance program is \$23 billion in the hole that they owed the treasury department. It's not

actually relatively sound. And if some of the forecasts are right in that, we're heading for more severe weather events, this is going to be an issue. So that's among the challenges that we're identifying for the federal government. And there's changes in globalization as well I could talk about.

Kelly Brownell:

You know, if you think about the complexity of how these systems interact with one another, go to the water example. So there are water shortages that affects our ability to raise certain crops. Agriculture is a massive user of water. Climate change will be changing both water availability and where crops can grow. So it strikes me that you need an enormous range of expertise within the agency in order to address these things, how in the world do you assemble that and cover all the bases that need to be covered?

Gene Dodaro:

Yeah, we've spent many years building a multidisciplinary workforce within the GAO where we have subject area experts on agricultural issues. We have technical experts and economists that focus on different areas, for example, as well as other disciplines. And we have communities of practice in GAO. Every a report that we do or project that we work on has a multidisciplinary workforce on there, and we'd select that, tailor it to each individual engagement. So we've got centers of expertise in GAO, but more importantly, they work together on a regular basis. However, it's impossible to have the full range of skills within GAO. So we have, for example, a standing contract with the national academies of sciences and we go there and they can arrange to get us additional experts to help us on different areas. They'll convene special expert panels for us, they'll identify experts to work on individual engagements. And then we have a very good, robust methodology for selecting experts on other engagements as well. So we are always searching for the full range of help necessary to do a comprehensive job.

Kelly Brownell:

So I know that some of the people listening to our conversation will be students interested in public policy. The GAO is often ranked as one of the best places to work in the federal government, but why is that? And what would you recommend students do who might be interested in a possible career there?

Gene Dodaro:

Yeah, we're always looking for good, talented people at the GAO. Our mission is a terrific mission to bring about positive change in government. That's why people come to the GAO, the ability to make a difference, but we recognize that the mission alone isn't enough. You have to have a good workplace environment. So we work very hard at work, life, family balance. We have a daycare facility in the GAO building, for example. We pay for students to help repay their student loans. We have very flexible workplace policy time. We have telework on an expanded basis right now where people can work in other areas. And so, and we have a very active exchange between GAO management and the employees. I look for their advice every year, we have a survey and we judge our performance on what changes we bring about in government, or results, what Congress thinks about us and service that we give there, but also our employees and what they think about working at the GAO. And it's very important to me that we have employee engagement because that brings about positive change.

Kelly Brownell:

Well I salute you and your colleagues for the wonderful work you're doing, and I very much appreciate you joining us for this podcast.

This transcript was exported on Jun 17, 2021 - view latest version [here](#).

Gene Dodaro:

Now it's been my pleasure, Kelly, thank you for having me.

Kelly Brownell:

So I've been talking with Gene Dodaro, the Comptroller General of the United States. Gene is at Duke to deliver the Terry Sanford Distinguished Lecture. The lecture was endowed by a gift to Duke University and the school by the William R Keenan Jr. Charitable trust. Until next time I am Kelly Brownell.