

## Transcript

### Policy 360, Episode 50

Kelly Brownell: Hello and welcome once again to policy 360. My guest today is Lisa Monaco and I'm Kelly Brownell the dean of the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University. Lisa Monaco served as President Obama's chief counterterrorism and homeland security advisor for his entire second term. She was responsible for policy coordination and crisis management on issues ranging from cyber security like Russian election hacking to natural disasters like the Ebola crisis to terrorist attacks at home and abroad. Previously Lisa spent 15 years at the Department of Justice. She was a federal prosecutor and helped Robert Mueller transform the FBI after 9/11 into a national security organization focused on preventing terrorist attacks in the United States. Well families are delighted to have you here.

Lisa Monaco: Great to be here.

Brownell: So as I understand you didn't ease into your position in the White House only scarcely three weeks into the job. Something important happened, can you tell us about that?

Monaco: Sure. It was my third week on the job and I was in my basement office in the West Wing of the White House and it was commonly referred to as the cave. It's the only office I've ever had where I feel tall - where I felt tall. Your listeners can't see me but I'm of diminutive stature topping out there about 5'2.

And I was in my office and when I looked up at the TV and saw that bombs had gone off in Boston. And it was April 15th of 2013 and it was -- the -- obviously the Boston Marathon bombing and I immediately kind of went into overdrive. [I] called my former boss Bob Mueller at the FBI. I called the head of the CIA, John Brennan, who had just preceded me in the job that I was doing then - and [I called] a number of other folks to try and get a handle on what information we had and what we knew.

And about 10 minutes later I took the probably about 50 steps up from my office up to the Oval Office to brief the president on what we knew and most importantly what we didn't know which we didn't know if this was just one in a series of attacks, if this had been directed from people overseas we didn't know a lot.

And so that set off a series of events over the course of that week and ultimately culminated in the manhunt in Boston. And you know the death of one of the bombers and I found myself at the end of the week (about, that was Thursday night, into early, early Friday morning) getting a call from Bob Mueller and he told me that one of the bombers was dead and the other was on the run.

And so by the end of my third week on the job I found myself calling and waking up the president at about 3:00 a.m. to tell him that this was the state of play. And people often asked me, "Boy was it a hard decision to decide to wake up the president out of a sound sleep?" And the truth of the matter is it wasn't really because it was a public safety issue. We didn't know what we had on our hands. And if the other Boston bomber was working with other people and whether there was another attack to come. So that was pretty a clear call to wake him up -- didn't have to do it a lot since.

Brownell: So you mentioned the FBI, the CIA, obviously the Boston police were involved in this, and the White House. Did you feel like there was good coordination among all those disparate players?

Monaco: So there was. But the most important coordination. You mentioned all Washington players. Right. The most important coordination was going on in and around Boston. And what I saw then and I've seen it repeated since is: really good coordination between federal, state and local officials.

Now it's not seamless and it's not without its hiccups to be sure. But one of the things that we as a nation I think did pretty well after 9/11 is make structural, legal and frankly cultural changes to allow for that type of coordination.

So what you saw in the immediate minutes and hours after the bombs went off at the finish line in Boston was the FBI setting up a command post right near the finish line. And the Boston Police, the FBI, the Homeland Security folks, the local police, the transit police, you name it, all coming together in one place and that kind of joint task force approach which governs almost everything we do in crisis response now was really at play.

Brownell: Well it sounds like an important advance that was made. So I read that President Obama would call you Dr. Doom. Why was that the case?

Monaco: Well because it is literally true. He did refer to me that way and it's because frankly -- one reason is my portfolio, as you said at the outset of included everything from terrorist attacks to cyber attacks to pandemics to natural disasters. So that's quite a litany. But every time I would show up in the Oval Office doorway it was usually because I was telling him something bad had happened. So that's why I got that nickname.

But you know every time I did -- as bad as the news was that I was often delivering to him, I also found that there was always a story behind it that I subsequently was able to tell him about a community coming together in the face of real tragedy and so that lightened the load a little bit.

Brownell: So one can imagine the life of a counterterrorism coordination individual in the White House being a very interesting thing to do -- challenging of course and tremendously demanding but -- what would a typical day look like.

Monaco: So that's easiest question because there was no such thing. I would begin my days by looking at (sometimes on the iPad version of it and sometimes on the hard copy) an intelligence briefing book which is one of the reforms that was made after 9/11.

Everyone in the national security team that served the president would get the overnight intelligence reports, assessments of threats. Mine was very tailored as you might imagine to terrorist threats - cyber - and other issues.

And I would spend my morning poring over that, talking to the professional from the intelligence community who was designated to brief me on it, and preparing to then meet with President Obama about it.

But in the ensuing hours invariably my calendar and my schedule for the day would literally get blown up because of some crises and so I never really had the opportunity to work through my to-do list.

Brownell: So that the top administration in place much has changed in the White House. What are the biggest changes that you've seen in the area of counterterrorism and are there changes that concern you?

Monaco: Well -- look there's some continuity and there's invariably going to be change no matter what administration [takes over] - you know whenever there's a change in administration. I think we don't know a lie yet which is kind of remarkable as we are nine months into this [Trump administration].

On the ISIS campaign the campaign against the so-called -- I like to call them the "so-called Islamic State" so as not to give them the benefit of their branding. I think we see a lot of continuity and with respect to the operations in Afghanistan you saw the speech from President Trump on that score.

So again continuing and almost doubling down, certainly, on the presence there and the work with our partners there.

The things that concern me though are less about individual policy choices - although as concerned as I am on some of those, like, things like the travel ban. But what I worry about is eroding the value of institutions and expertise and our national security policy-making process. I think we saw some of that with the initial travel ban. Some of that has been changed, there've been new policies I think -- new policy processes that are being put in place or we've read have been put in place. But that's what I worry about. I worry about erosion of the credibility of institutions.

Brownell: I wonder about your thoughts on women in the administration. I know you've spoken about that before. Could you tell us what your thoughts are and where you see things going?

Monaco: Well in terms of representation of women in the Trump administration, I think the jury's out in some respects because there's been I think a pretty slow start in getting folks nominated and then there's always a challenge in getting folks confirmed. That's invariably a slow process.

One area that has gotten some attention in the last several days is concerning to me as a former prosecutor I think the first batch of nominees for U.S. attorney positions of chief federal prosecutor in every state there were 41 nominees and only one woman.

And so that's a concern from the standpoint of -- you want to have multiple voices, multiple views represented and you want to be able to have people look around the room or look at the judge's bench or whatever the setting is to be able to see people like themselves whether it's giving young people a path or something to shoot for or just represent different views. I think that's really important. So so that that that concerns me and what we're seeing in the in the representation in the U.S. attorney nominees there's a price for it.

Brownell: So I'm interested in the transformation that happened at the FBI. You worked closely with Robert Mueller to really change the focus of the agency. How did the focus change?

Monaco: So after 9/11 Bob Mueller set about doing a few things. One is we prioritize in what the FBI would do. It has a long and of course storied history of being the premier criminal investigators investigative agency in our country, but its focus really before 9/11 and the sea change we all underwent after that horrible day was to be focused on investigating crimes after they occurred.

What Director Mueller had to do was shift the orientation and turn it into a national security organization focused on preventing the next attack and what that meant is focusing on intelligence. And doing everything from laying out very clearly the FBI priorities which are still the same to this day: counterterrorism, counterintelligence, cybersecurity et cetera and creating and building (that means recruiting training hiring et cetera) for an intelligence cadre that could be poised to use intelligence to make sure we prevent the next attack.

And what I saw was leadership really matters. And an organization responds to how the top of that organization spends his or her time. So when I was chief of staff to Bob Mueller he would spend the first several hours of his day getting his executive team in there getting briefed on the main cases focusing on what the terrorism threats were and that ripples out through an organization. And it then takes hold and I saw that process.

Brownell: So let's change the topic a bit - so a lot's been written about how the Obama administration dealt with Syria. Is there anything you might've changed in terms of how you advise President Obama?

Monaco: Look this is one of the most intractable problems that we faced as a national security team. And you know there will be endless books I think written and ink spilled and what is true is we always came at this problem from the standpoint of what is in the national security interests of the United States.

You know there's there's lots of discussion in the situation room about values -- whether it's humanitarian values, whether it's international law, whether it's security of our allies. We've got to look at all of those when you're making decisions about sending people into harm's way as the president did. And think about what's in our national security interest, what is the second, third, fourth order effects of the decision you make as president.

We kept coming at this problem again and again and the guidepost was always national security interest for the United States. My focus- you asked me what would I change - my focus was, as you might imagine, on the terror threat emanating from that area. And as a result we focused very hard on the emergence of al Qaeda in what is now known as al Qaeda in Syria establishing a safe haven. And as a result we went after them quite relentlessly and made sure that al Qaeda in Syria was part of the initial campaign of military campaign in Iraq and Syria to disrupt those plots in 2014.

Brownell: So you once said and I'm quoting here, "I am as a kind of a condition of my job constantly concerned about what we're not seeing and what might be around the corner." So when it comes to terrorism and homeland security what has your attention these days?

Monaco: What has my attention these days is the threat of what has been referred to variably as the homegrown terrorism problem, the homegrown extremism problem, or the so-called lone wolf problem. All of this I think could be described as the problem of self radicalized individuals. And I say that not to discount the continued concern -- look we're sitting here two days after the 60th anniversary of 9/11.

The threat of a complex internationally and foreign-directed attack such as happened on 9/11 is greatly diminished due to the incredible work of military intelligence, law enforcement, diplomatic homeland security professionals from Republican and Democratic administrations alike.

We are not done with that threat. That threat is not zero. I just mentioned al-Qaeda in Syria. But the new phase in the "War on Terror" - the so-called war on terror - is I think this self-radicalized individual. And the engine driving that threat is social media and the ability of an individual to self-radicalize and to hear the message that for instance ISIS is putting out to act wherever you are with tools that we have in everyday life. And what worries me about that as both somebody who worked in prosecution and intelligence is you never know - "how do you know when something goes wrong in someone's head? This this is the type of threat that isn't constructed and doesn't do the things that would come into the intelligence net that we built after 9/11. So that's a real challenge and it's a huge challenge for law enforcement and it's a challenge for communities that we're going to have to rise up to.

Brownell: So this is a bit related to what you just said, but if President Trump were here and asking your advice on what to do around issues of counterterrorism what would you suggest?

Monaco: Well one of the things is that we cannot -- we have to stop doing things to play into the recruitment narrative for instance that ISIS has. So everything that we do wittingly or unwittingly to feed this notion that we are engaged in a clash of civilizations plays directly into ISIS recruiting playbook. They recruit based on the notion that the West and the United States is in a war against Islam and in a class of civilizations. So one very tangible thing we could do is to is to not play into that.

Brownell: So thank you so much for joining us. It was very informative. I appreciate you spending time with us.

Monaco: Thanks for having me.

So Lisa Monaco served as homeland security and counterterrorism adviser to President Obama from 2013 to 2017. Lisa's on campus today at Duke to deliver the Terry Sanford Distinguished Lecture. Her lecture is sponsored by the Triangle Center on Terrorism and Homeland Security at Duke University, with support from the W.R. Kenan Charitable Trust, and is co-sponsored by Duke's Program in American Grand Strategy. Special thanks to David Schanzer for helping arrange this visit. Until next time I'm Kelly Brownell.