

Policy 360 – Episode 63 – James Clapper - Transcript

Judith Kelly (JK): Hello, and welcome to Policy 360. I'm Judith Kelly, the incoming Dean of the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University. Today, I'm very pleased to welcome James Clapper to the program. He served as Director of National Intelligence under President Obama, and in that role he oversaw the CIA, the NSA, and the FBI. James Clapper has more than 50 years of military and intelligence experience. He served in the Air Force and was Director of the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency under President George H. W. Bush. Later, he was Director of the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency under President George W. Bush. Welcome to Policy 360.

James Clapper (JC): Thanks for having me.

JK: So, given your lifetime of experience, I'm sure that the question most listeners have on their minds right now is: What do you think is the biggest threat to our country right now?

JC: Well, first of all, it's always dangerous for people in the intelligence community to pick one threat, because it could imply that you can exclude the others.

JK: Sure.

JC: And what I found is you don't get a pass on any of them, but I would say right now in the near term, I think the most profound threat the United States faces is Russia. For two reasons. One: it does pose an existential threat to the United States. It's sort of reinforced or highlighted by President Putin's recent chest-beating speech, but I think even more serious is the sort of soft war, if you will, the information warfare that the Russians are mounting against us, notably their interference in the 2016 election, but that continues. And this to me is a very serious threat which requires not just a whole government approach, but a whole society approach. They are determined to undermine the basic fabric of our system and promote as much polarization as they possibly can. Right now, the United States is an easy target for them.

JK: And, of course, not just the United States, but Great Britain and parts of Eastern Europe have also been on the receiving end.

JC: Well, of course. Russians have—going back to the Soviet Era, a long history of interfering in elections, theirs and other people's. And they do focus on Western democracies, notably Western Europe and, of course, now ours.

JK: Yeah. Well, thank you. I thought we would explore the topic of leadership. So, your father served in the Army for 28 years. What was his role?

JC: Well, he was a signal intelligence officer. He went in the Army towards the end of World War II. And, after the war, when everyone else was shedding uniforms and demobilizing, he decided he'd found a profession that appealed to him, so he stayed in the Army for, as you indicate, 28 years. And he never pushed me to follow his footsteps in the Army, or particularly in

intelligence, but I just, I guess, naturally gravitated to it. Perhaps I inherited the gene on it, I don't know.

JK: Was there anything that he said to you or did that you've thought back on during trying times of your own life?

JC: Well, one of the things he taught me by way of example was the importance of treating people well. Intelligence is—well it's not unique, but—it involves getting people—leadership and intelligence—getting people to use their intellects, motivating people to use their intellects. And there is, kind of, perhaps an art form to that, and I think more by example or osmosis he kind of exemplified that. That was important. I think another lesson he taught me, this may seem a little off the wall, is the importance of humor.

JK: Uh-huh.

JC: Particularly in stressful situations or highly-charged situations where humor, particularly self-deprecating humor, can be a great leadership too. He was pretty good at that.

JK: Uh-huh. M-hm. Sounds like a wonderful man.

JC: He was. I've written a book, it's about ready to be published in May, and it's given me an opportunity to be contemplative. And, I now realize—my dad's been dead for many, many years—and I now realize, in the course of contemplating and thinking about and writing this book, just what a profound impact he had on me, and I wish I'd had that insight when he was still alive.

JK: To have the opportunity to tell him, yes.

So, I would like to go back to 2010, when President Obama nominated you to be the top nation's intelligence official and, at that time, he said that you possessed- and I'm quoting here—"a quality that I value in all my advisors, a willingness to tell leaders what we need to know, even if it's not what we want to hear." Can you give us an example of when you might have had to tell a president something he needed to know but might not have wanted to hear?

JC: Oh, yes. There are many, many examples of that. I think one that stands out is just on—and was not long after I took over as Director of National Intelligence. I was in the Oval Office to brief him and it was on the topic of Russia and the indications we had that they might have been in the throes of developing a weapon system that could have been, could be in violation of the New START Treaty, which at the time early in the Obama administration was a very high priority. And it so happened that the Senate Foreign Relations Committee—this is on a Tuesday—the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on the following Thursday was going to vote on the New START Treaty and to whether to refer it to the Senate at-large for a vote. And so, I gave him this [confidential] information, which he probably would have preferred not to have heard, and I also made the point that and we could not keep that from the Congress. We absolutely had to brief them right away. Now, a couple of the president's advisors were not happy about that, but the president, to his great credit, agreed that perhaps the intelligence

community had an inelegant sense of timing, but nevertheless we needed to tell the Senate Foreign Relations Committee about this potentially-damaging information. We did, and to their credit they went ahead and voted it out anyway. And, I can also recall having to brief the President on when we first learned about Edward Snowden; that was not a pleasant session.

JK: Right. So, perhaps while that quality of a good leader, a good adviser is somebody who will tell the president what they don't want to hear. A good quality of a good leader is somebody who listens, even when they don't want to hear.

JC: That's right. To President Obama's great credit, he insisted on that, ... the intelligence community, he expected the unvarnished truth, our best assessment of whatever the issue was and not to taint it or slant it or politicize it.

JK: What are some other qualities—key qualities—that you consider of leaders?

JC: Well, I think, I have to restrict my remarks to the intelligence profession, and I think communication skills are extremely important in the intelligence business. Just the nature of it. The active forms of communication, speaking and writing obviously are important, but the passive skills are also important—reading. And, something we don't do very well in Washington: listening. And those communication skills, I think, in addition to other, perhaps more intangible qualities are important.

JK: It's interesting that you point these out because a lot of times people want to hear very big and visionary language about the key qualities of leadership. And yet, at the end of the day, you are saying it's about communication. It's about being willing to listen.

JC: Well, willing—as a leader, being willing to listen to subordinates and creating an atmosphere where they're not afraid to tell you bad news. Sometimes, leaders in very senior positions will fall into the "emperor has no clothes" syndrome, where [they're] doing something wrong or making a profound mistake, and people around them are afraid to tell him that. That that's not a good situation.

JK: Right, so you've worked with each of the Bush presidents, respectively. What do you think their strengths were as leaders?

JC: Well, the two Bush's—[I] didn't have as close a relationship with either of them, as I did, I was in a farther down the food chain-

JK: Right.

JC: -in the two agencies I was fortunate enough to, privileged enough to lead for almost nine years together. I'd say the elder, older President Bush was a tremendous humanist. He had a great touch for people and could easily relate to them. I had occasion to brief him a couple of times and he put you at ease that sort of thing. And he was legendary for the notes he wrote to people—personal notes, handwritten notes. The younger Bush, I thought, was perhaps a little bit

more of an assertive leader, and I thought that leadership came out in the aftermath of 9/11.

JK: What about Obama?

JC: Well, I think President Obama is known, you know, to have been very cerebral. He's very, very smart, and he's a great human being, I came to find. I wasn't a part of the campaign. When I was brought on in 2010, I didn't know President Obama, he didn't know me. But I think we developed a pretty strong bond over the six and a half years I served as DNI.

JK: So, what we spoke before about the ability and the willingness to tell a leader something they don't want to hear. Most of the time that was in confidence, just in a private conversation, but you more recently decided to speak out publicly against our current president, Donald Trump. Was that a hard decision for you to make?

JC: Well, it really wasn't something I agonized over for a couple weeks and said, "Well, I'm going to speak out." More accurately, I think I sort of backed into it. The issues with the president—now, President Trump started when he was President-elect, and when we—I say "we", the Director of the FBI (then James Comey), Director of the CIA (then John Brennan), and the Director of National Security Agency (still Admiral Mike Rogers) and I—went to Trump Tower on the 6th of January to brief then President-elect Trump and his team on the Russian interference. We had completed what's called an Intelligence Community Assessment, which was tasked by President Obama around the 5th of December, to put together all the reporting at whatever classification level, to put in one place, one document the extent, magnitude, and depth of the Russian interference in the election. And, early on, then President-elect Trump just couldn't accept that. I think the reason is—and I think that it continues today—that the Intelligence Community Assessment that we did had the effect of calling into question of the legitimacy of his election and his singular indifference to the threat posed by Russia—which continues, particularly the information warfare threat part—quite apart from their formidable nuclear arsenal—I think puts this country in peril.

JK: M-hmh.

JC: And so, recalling the people that spoke out in defense of the intelligence community after the Snowden revelations, notably retired General Mike Hayden, the former Director of CIA, and the former Director of NSA, and Mike spoke up on our behalf. And that is much more difficult when you're in the government, in an administration, to speak up about it. And so I, that kind of continued, and my career progression and the eyes of Mr. Trump went from being a "Nazi" to—of course, he characterized us as "Nazis" for—blaming us for the revelation about the dossier, which was absurd. I called him on the 10th of January after a news conference he had which he characterized intelligence community as "Nazis." I felt that, I only had ten days left, but I felt duty-bound to defend the men and women in the intelligence community who toil long and hard, and often in hazardous conditions overseas, to keep this country safe and secure. And I tried to impart to him what a national treasure that he was inheriting which stood ready to serve him and to do all it could to make him successful. But, anyway, I became a "Nazi," and then a "Choker" after I appeared before—with Sally Yates—before hearing on the 8th of May for a subcommittee to the Senate Judiciary; to a "Political Hack," on Veterans Day, no less, after having served 34

years in the military. And then most recent is a "Liar and Leaker," but I'm in good company with the likes of Senator Mark Warner, Congressman Adam Schiff, and John Brennan, and Jim Comey, so I'm okay with that. But, my main concern apart from the personal shots, is—which don't bother me, which is a sad commentary in and of itself—is the assaults on the intelligence community, which I believe will continue to convey truth to power, even if the power doesn't listen to the truth.

JK: Do you think that the way that President Trump uses Twitter, or other vehicles of speaking out, makes it harder for people who are on the inside to just be quiet?

JC: Well, even before that, I think it's very hard for them to keep up with these utterances—if you want to call them that—these tweets, because they reflect, you know, erratic thought process and changes in position—changes—and they are policy. Like it or not, those are official written expressions of what the President believes, or what he thinks should happen, or what his characterization of things [is]. And I think it's very difficult for people to, in the government, to just keep up with that—let alone speak up.

JK: Are you much in touch with people inside the agencies you've worked for? Do you have a sense of what the morale is at the moment?

JC: Well, I think for most people in the intelligence community, they're going to hunker down and do their job, and they aren't directly affected by what the president says and does. I mean, I do think it puts a tremendous burden on leadership to provide the "top cover" so that the intelligence community can continue to do its duty.

JK: So, we're back to the question of leadership, thank you for bringing us back. So, here at the Sanford School, we're training future leaders and if you could give one piece of advice to these future leaders, these young people, what would it be?

JK: Well I think it's important, whatever endeavor that you end up as a career—that if turns out to be public service, at least for some time, well, that's a good thing—and I think there's an important thing about one having courage of one's convictions. To have beliefs and then be willing to defend them, if I only had to pick one.

JC: Yeah. Well, thank you very much for joining me today. My guest has been James Clapper. He served as Director of National Intelligence and President Obama's top security adviser from 2010 to 2017. James Clapper is at Duke to give the inaugural David M. Rubenstein Distinguished Lecture. Until next time, I'm Judith Kelly.