Transcript: Policy 360 Episode 97 – Anatomy of a Flawed Policy

Judith Kelley: Everybody has some kind of recollection of where they were on 9/11. It's like one of those things where you can turn to anybody and say, "Where were you at that time?" Just like the time stopped. And since then it's just invaded our lives in so many different ways, from how we dress when we go to the airport, what we pack, and when we travel. And not only that, but this concept of terrorism seems to have seeped into our lives and different places in our lives, in schools. And then, we think about violence and extreme violence as penetrating our lives in different ways.

Judith Kelley: Welcome to Policy 360. I'm Judith Kelley, Dean of the Sanford School of Public Policy. In 2009, President Obama launched an initiative that was designed to use a community approach outreach to the problem of terrorism and that was called the countering violent extremism policy. And David Schanzer, my guest in Policy 360 today who is a professor here at the public policy school, has been looking at that policy and now it's 10 years out since that policy was launched. And he has some views on this policy that are critical, but also nuanced. And so he's here to discuss with us today what his insights are. So David, can you start by just describing the CVE policy for us? How was it designed?

David Schanzer: Well, we have a lot of different ways we try to counter violent extremism. In a general sense, you could say that our military activities in Afghanistan are part of countering violent extremism. What the FBI does is part. So in some ways it's a little bit of a misnomer or it's a name that doesn't help us understand that well. But what President Obama was doing and to some degrees even in the Bush administration before then, is the looking at the idea of really preventative measures. How can we reduce the supply side to some extent, if you're going to look at it from an economic point of view, of people who adopt these ideologies and are willing to engage in violence, what can we do to actually stop that process? So we have fewer people, fewer insurgents or radical extremists for our military to address, for our FBI to address. It's a preventative approach.

Judith Kelley: Start with thinking about the cause of the problem rather than treating the symptoms type of approach.

David Schanzer: Yes, but not ... some people say we have to deal with the root causes of terrorism and they look at things like a global poverty or unemployment or things like that. I'd say it's a little bit more-

Judith Kelley: Approximate.

David Schanzer: ... of a targeted kind of approach.

Judith Kelley: So what was the gist of that policy then? How was it designed?

David Schanzer: Well, what I talk about in my report is while the very well intentioned to try to look at what are preventative approaches, the government didn't really do a very good job of defining that. So different agencies kind of took it to mean different things. The FBI, I believe, took it to say, "let's work with communities to try to find out as early as possible who the bad guys are, so we can do some sort of intervention or do surveillance or engage in a law enforcement activity."

David Schanzer: Others looked at it from a much more social services approach. "Oh well, let's see what we can do educationally in communities. Let's see what we can do working with religious authorities to try to provide resilience against these ideas, these ideologies that are so foreign to mainstream Islam if we're going to talk about that strand of the threat."

David Schanzer: So, the problem was different entities kind of felt, took different approaches and it wasn't really well crisply defined when the policy was launched, which led to a lot of its problems.

Judith Kelley: That sounds kind of loosey goosy, like make it whatever you want it to be. I mean, were there resources put at different agencies' disposal, saying this is your end goal and figure out how to get there or?

David Schanzer: That was really another big problem is that the Obama administration wanted to come out and say, "Yes, we're out there. We're doing things to prevent extremism. We're doing things on the demand side. We're not just trying to arrest our way out of this problem. We're not just using the military force."

David Schanzer: But it was very much top down. The document ultimately is issued from the National Security Council, but there was no program budget, resources, lead agency. It was put out there as a kind of a broad directive. We want you entities go do these things. But as I say, no program, no structure, no administration. Ultimately it evolved to that point. But that meant it was, it took a very, very long time to develop and at that point kind of ultimately failed.

Judith Kelley: So how do you even know whether something like that is working? Whatever it is you're trying to do. I mean you can't really know whether something didn't happen, because it didn't happen.

David Schanzer: Well, that's the general problem with counter terrorism in general. So, we know we haven't had an event like 9/11 on that scale since then. So, people can say, "Well, the war in Afghanistan worked. What the FBI has doing has worked." And maybe it has, maybe it hasn't. It's always hard to evaluate.

David Schanzer: There's a lot of hesitancy and oftentimes people will say, "Well, we shouldn't even try this preventative approach because we don't know. We don't know, prove to me that if we invest $10 million and a variety of these different kinds of programs that are designed to build resiliency in communities to extremist ideology, whether it be the ideology from Al-Qaeda or the ideology of white

supremacism, that while that means we'll prevent violence and prevent terrorism." Well bottom line is we don't know what works in that regard, but of course we're willing to spend literally billions, maybe trillions of dollars on military style interventions when we don't really know if those are going to work in the same way either.

David Schanzer: So, sometimes my view is we have to try things out and we won't necessarily know or have linear proof that it is worked. But that doesn't mean we shouldn't try and experiment. And also, try to find maybe intermediate metrics. Our metrics probably can't be terrorism incidents that didn't happen. That's never going to be. But maybe if we can show and do baseline measurements of people's attitudes about these, let's say white supremacy, and then we do an intervention, a treatment of some sort, and then we can measure at the end and we can see people's attitudes have changed about what white supremacy is or whether it's justified and so on. Well, then we would have a program that has done something.

Judith Kelley: I mean it must be possible also, at least on the internet, to monitor the extent of extremist language groups that gather followers that visit certain sites, website traffic, and such things?

David Schanzer: Well, I'm not a web scraper technologist, but certainly people do study internet discourse. I don't know if they can do it in such a mass way to identify those kinds of level trends. But yeah, that would be an interesting metric as well.

Judith Kelley: So, we have a policy that wasn't particularly well defined from the beginning, has taken some shape over time, and now 10 years in, you sit down and try to look at this policy. How do you even go about that from the perspective of a researcher trying to assess the policy? What methods did you use to do that?

David Schanzer: Well, it was a challenge, because the program was being implemented and it evolved while we were trying to assess it. So in some ways like trying to be a mechanic and fix a car while it was moving down the highway. So, I had challenges and I would say also maybe its flaws, but I would call it kind of a rough cut early stage assessment, as opposed to a highly scientific one, I'll admit that.

Judith Kelley: Sure.

David Schanzer: What we did is, it was all qualitative. We spoke to all the key people who from the federal government who were in charge of running and developing the program. We went into the various agencies who had been assigned to be the leaders and they were essentially Department of Homeland Security, Department of Justice, FBI, and even the National Counterterrorism Center. So we talked to all the top people there.

David Schanzer: And then our methods were to look at some of the key actors who the government had designated as people that were going to be there, essentially main community liaisons. And those were the United States attorneys in the districts around the country. And we did a survey of one of the first surveys ever of all of the U.S. attorneys and what their ideas and attitudes were about these programs. And we did interviews; I think I interviewed four or five U.S. attorneys themselves to see what they were doing, what they felt, their reactions, what were the strengths and weaknesses, as well as some of their staff. And we were doing the same thing with the FBI as well. I can tell an interesting wrinkle about this study that didn't go particularly well is that when we started, we hadn't included the FBI for a variety of reasons.

David Schanzer: And then the FBI actually came to us and said, "We want to be included in your study." And we said, "Great." And they actually gave us some additional money. And then we started doing some of our field interviews. The head of the program left and was replaced by somebody else who didn't really like this scrutiny very much. And they threw us out. I wasn't very happy about it. And the conclusions weren't that great for the FBI. Maybe if they had told a more fulsome story, it would've come out better. I don't know.

Judith Kelley: So what's the main takeaway?

David Schanzer: Well, the main takeaway is that these ideas, this concept, has potential, but the way it was executed and rolled out by the Obama administration had so many problems that it didn't gain hold firmly enough so that it had a enough oomph going into the Trump administration to survive.

David Schanzer: All the initiatives that were started under Obama were zeroed out in the budget. The office that was created in the Department of Homeland Security, although it still exists under a different name, was kind of hollowed out, all the key people kind of left. So what's interesting though now, is that after El Paso, everybody is looking at our domestic extremism problem. And people are asking the same questions that the Obama administration was asking in 2009, like how can we prevent this stuff from happening? It's not good enough to let these incidents occur and then deal with the consequences afterwards. So I'm told there might be, there's a re-look even in this administration about perhaps reviving some of these ideas.

Judith Kelley: So are you saying that in the old policy it was really mostly focused on Muslim Americans and not on these other phenomena?

David Schanzer: Well, that's another flaw that I identify in the program. Of course, ISIS and all kinds of violence, homegrown extremism was foremost on people's minds and it was seen as the primary threat. But for other studies I've done, we saw that what we would call forms of domestic extremism based on either antigovernment animus or white supremacy was really, when you look at the data, very much a equal kind of threat here in the United States.

David Schanzer:	We did a survey and another study where we showed that we did a survey of police chiefs around the country. This was about 2007, 2008 and at that point, the police chiefs were identifying domestic extremism based on antigovernment or white supremacy as being a bigger threat in their perception than the threat from abroad, from Al-Qaeda and ISIS.
Judith Kelley:	So that's right. That's really interesting, David, because does that suggest that the narrative that Trump has vilified, has gone after the Muslim population in particular targeted, that is an oversimplification? That that type of targeting, misguided targeting, occurred even under the previous administration?
David Schanzer:	It depends how you use the ... what you mean by the word targeting. I mean, I believe very strongly that if we thought that these methods were going to be effective for building resiliency against the ideas that Al-Qaeda and ISIS were propagating to young Muslim youth in America, that we equally should be concerned and believe that we might have methods or techniques to try to deal with that other form of threat, which would be the notions of white supremacy or anti-government violence, skinhead Neo-Nazism, all these different forums. That we should also try to use those techniques to deal with children, young people, who were being exposed to those ideas. And the Obama administration, they kind of talked a good game about an all hazards approach. But when you looked at what was actually happening on the ground, there was nobody was doing anything preventative to try to deal with the white supremacy threat.
Judith Kelley:	So is that a long way of saying yes?
David Schanzer:	Yes, it's too hard. Somebody I really respect, the former Secretary of Homeland Security, Jeh Johnson, he gave a speech and he said, "You know, we see the Al-Qaeda threat as being the most prevalent. And by the way, I can't sit down and have a round table with white supremacists extremists or skinheads. They don't come, they won't come to a community round table." And I thought that was just symbolic of the kind of warped logic that was affecting the program. The idea was, well, the Muslim community will come and meet with us and therefore we'll do these programs with them. But since, we can't get the actual white supremacist possible violent extremists to sit down with us, therefore we're just not going to do this problem. And to me that was just a warped way of thinking about it. Because guess what? The Al-Qaeda, ISIS Muslim person who was an extremist wasn't sitting down wasn't sitting down with the Secretary of Homeland Security either.
Judith Kelley:	Yeah, it's a warped analogy.
David Schanzer:	It was the peaceful, the peaceful Muslims.
Judith Kelley:	You just need peaceful white people to show up, if that's the analogy, right?

David Schanzer: Exactly. That is exactly right. And the parallel was totally lost. And not only was that a problem from a fairness point of view, it was a problem from not understanding the totality of the real threat we were experienced in America. The other thing is, is that in my view and I think I showed this very clearly in the report, is that you can't get the Muslim community, the totality of the Muslim community, to buy into this idea if they felt, and you used the word targeted, if they felt they were being asked to be partners in a program that was genuinely trying to deal with all of these threats across lines and everybody had to pitch in, White people, Muslim people, Black people, as an American problem will be with American solution. Then I think there would have been a lot more acceptance, but because there was this targeting, this felt like they said, "Well, that you're making us feel like we're the suspected terrorist."

Judith Kelley: Exactly.

David Schanzer: Therefore we think this whole CVE is just another form of discrimination against Muslims-

Judith Kelley: Right, another form of profiling

David Schanzer: And it really divided the Muslim community very sharply between those who wanted to participate and they thought this program had value, and others who saw it as a deep form of discrimination. And that also undermined its prospect for success, because you can't, these things don't work if the program is literally dividing the community you hope to work with.

Judith Kelley: So yeah. So, it sounds like the Trump administration phasing this out, maybe not a bad idea or do you think there's anything we should have salvaged from it?

David Schanzer: Well, I sympathize with a lot of the criticisms of the program, but I feel like it's a bad idea to abandon the concept entirely, because what I come back to in the end is that we have a hate problem in America and that hate often unfortunately manifests itself in violence. And I've seen it in shootings with synagogues, which of course break my heart as an American Jew. We've seen violence inspired by Al-Qaeda and ISIS. It's kind of down in recent years, but it could easily come back. And then we've seen this horrible white extremists violence that manifests itself in of course the El Paso shooting and and many others. So, we have a hate problem in America and we can't arrest our way out of it. Waiting till somebody does something and then either arresting them or killing them in the act is not a solution that I think most Americans find satisfying. So I think we do need to strive to find efforts and ways, understand the origins of these problems and try to find ways to intervene. I mean-

Judith Kelley: So is there anything at all from this policy that you would recommend holding onto?

David Schanzer: Yes. One of the strands of CVE, again, I said different people interpret different ways and in different directions, was the idea that we should develop interventions for individuals who seem on a glide path. That they're moving towards. They're adopting a radical ideology. And maybe they haven't crossed the line into criminality yet, but they're beginning to and show signs of a willingness to engage in violence to perpetrate their ideas.

David Schanzer: And while I understand, I don't ... You can have radical ideas without becoming violent. I agree, it's not necessarily a glide path. But I also think that if you have evidence of indications of violence. And what was happening and what we were developing was community based interventions where somebody who was headed in this direction, maybe it's mental health services, maybe it's counseling from a religious leader, maybe it's something about problem in their personal life that has caused them the sense of being lost or grievance where they go out and look for something else. That we could build these community based interventions as a way of taking people off that glide path and trying to straighten their life around and therefore also not having to use surveillance and the criminal justice system to deal with these people.

Judith Kelley: Yeah, I was going to ask about that. I mean, I wanted specifically to ask about that, because if we are going to try to catch people on the glide path, doesn't that mean we have to be comfortable with a certain level of surveillance? I mean, otherwise, how are we going to catch them as they slide?

David Schanzer: Right. Well, there's two different ways. I mean, who finds out first? I mean, one of the ideas of building trust in the community and so on is that all the evidence shows that the people who are most likely to have known, even when somebody is going to possibly perpetrate violence and further into these ideologies is relatives, close relations, and friends. However, given the environment, people are very scared about coming forward.

David Schanzer: So again, if you have these approaches where you're trying to build some sort of sense of relationship of trust between government authorities and the communities that can be recruited, where the young people can be recruited to violent extremism, if you can kind of build that, maybe that kind of people are more willing, would be more willing, to the people who know, the people who see the signs. So they're seeing these things anyway. And let's face it, we know that in terms of social media, the FBI surveillance is happening anyway. And frankly, a lot of these people are broadcasting their ideas and their intentions in multiple ways. So, you can find out about who are potential violent extremists without getting a search warrant or we-

Judith Kelley: Right, right. That's what I meant earlier about some of these online communities. I mean, it sits a bit uneasy with me, the whole family sort of snitch model where we're back to 1984 George Orwell. And nowadays people could even do such kind of reporting in punitive ways, to get family members or others in trouble that they're not happy with and just call the hotline and report

them. And it could cause enormous problems for people to be flagged in this way, so.

David Schanzer: I agree. I mean, not without a problems, but a lot of ... Sometimes when we have these events and then we look back and we say, "Well, what could have been done differently?" Something as horrible as the Newtown shootings. What could have been done with that young man who committed this horrible violence? We often are saying, "Wow, if only somebody had come forward at an earlier stage."

Judith Kelley: Sure, sure.

David Schanzer: And my view is if we make this a non-punitive, if we make this more of a social services oriented activity intervention then the parents and the communities want this too. They don't want their young people getting 10-

Judith Kelley: Black list.

David Schanzer: Well no, I'm talking about a 10 to 15 year sentence for essentially buying a plane ticket to go travel to ... This is again a number of years ago, go travel to Turkey, go to Syria to fight for ISIS. So communities don't want that route or a 15 year sentence for material support. So there was, this is the thing that there was like the most buy-in I think from the community in terms of services and an approach to preventing terrorism that they wanted to see. And I'd like to, in any kind of a reinvention of CVE, I'd certainly think we should focus there first.

Judith Kelley: So, when we think about the reinvention of CVE, there are some presidential candidates who have endorsed this policy, not withstanding, its lack of of success and phasing out by the Trump administration. So what are your thoughts on that? How would you advise those candidates?

David Schanzer: I would advise them first to tread carefully and work with communities first. Because you shouldn't announce the program and then go out and tell people, "Here's what I want you to do." So you need to build this from the bottom up rather from the top down. The second piece of advice that I have, it's not going to work if it's all law enforcement and security agencies that are running the programs, because I just thought it was a terrible mistake to essentially put the FBI as one of the four lead agencies for CVE. Because at the same time the FBI was the lead counter-terrorism agency for investigating and preventing terrorist acts from occurring. So they were terribly conflicted and trying to build trust with the community and investigate it at the same time. So you need to find other partners.

David Schanzer: I would also advise to kind of push this down locally. That if you're going to have governments involved have the federal government do things like provide funding, training, convening power, but direct program implementation by the feds is basically a bad idea in this instance. Get it to lower levels of government

who are in charge of health, safety, welfare, mental health, and things like that, rather than the federal government, which its primary purposes, or not primary purpose, but it has key responsibilities for national security. Those are not the entities that you want to do that.

David Schanzer: If you can do those things and of course make it across threats, you can't just pick out one threat and say, "We're going to work on this first and we'll get to everything else later." Because the communities won't buy in. If you could do those four things, I think you have a fighting chance of working.

Judith Kelley: Sounds good. Thank you so much for joining me today, David. David Schanzer is a faculty member at the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University, and he also directs the Triangle Center on Terrorism and Homeland Security. So we'll have a link to his report on our website Policy360.org and we'll be back soon with another conversation. I'm Judith Kelley.