Manoj Mohanan:

Hello and welcome to Policy 360. I'm Manoj Mohanan, Interim Dean of the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University. And today I'm pleased to welcome the Honorable Dr. John Hillen to the studio. Welcome, John.

John Hillen:

Thank you. Manoj. Good to be here.

Manoj Mohanan:

John is an amazing guy. He served as an army reconnaissance officer, a paratrooper, and was awarded the bronze star. He became US Assistant Secretary of State for political military affairs in the Bush administration, spending much of his time in war zones such as Iraq and Afghanistan. He earned a PhD and has been CEO of several companies. He's a bestselling author too. Most recently exploring strategy and strategic management in business. And now we are delighted he's here at Duke. He's affiliated with the Duke Center for Politics and the program in American Grand Strategy. He's also teaching in our master of National Security policy program. So John, I have a couple of things I'd like to focus our conversation on. One is the concept of American grand strategy, what it is, what it matters in this world and that world that's getting increasingly more complex. And second, you are also on this bipartisan commission to help revitalizing the teaching of American civic history, civics and history. So let's start with the second. From your perspective, what's the issue with civics education in the US? What are we getting wrong?

John Hillen:

Yeah. Well, thankfully there's a move to get it right. There's a big bipartisan push to have ... Americans are just people living in America really understand the forms of political and economic life and the rules around them and social life that we've constructed for ourselves over the years. And it's one thing to have shared facts about history, and that's important in and of itself. And it's depressing. You say, "What are we getting wrong?" Well, I'll give you an example. Only one third of native born Americans can pass the citizenship test that we ask American immigrants to pass. They pass at a 90% rate. Only one third of Americans can pass it. So we're a little bit behind on everybody having the same basic facts about the oldest question in political philosophy, which is how do things work around here?

But I think the deeper, more important meaning of civics is shared, meaning. What are we all part of together? What is the purpose of this enterprise? How do we interact with each other? What are the ways we can really touch our best selves as a civilization? And that bleeds into one of the classes I'm teaching here at Duke, which is how to think in an age of political polarization where we really focus on creating civic virtue. We want to grow our civic virtue by learning how to talk about difficult and divisive political or social or economic issues with each other, but with an eye to collaborating and understanding together, thinking out loud together rather with an eye to forming teams and defeating each other. And so civics and civil discourse and a healthier political dialogue all stream together. So it's nice to see Duke and other universities really leaning into this reinvigoration of American civics.

Manoj Mohanan:

Well, thank you. And we are delighted that you're doing this here at Duke as well. And so let me go back to something you mentioned, civic virtue versus civics. Can you help us understand the distinction between the two and what's the virtue part and what's the civics part in there?

John Hillen:

Yeah. So I think civics is facts and figures and they're really important. I'll give you one example. There was a piece in our student newspaper, the Chronicle here a couple of days ago releasing the results of a poll. The Duke class of 2028. And they were polled on their political sensibilities, their political affiliations, various political questions. And one of the questions was, do you support or oppose the Supreme Court ruling on such and such a case? I would say a more civic informed question would be, do you support or oppose the policy that they were talking about? Because to support or oppose a ruling is a question of law, not a question of policy preference. And I find that with a lot of Americans, they just get the basic roles and institutions of our complex system of government a little bit wrong, and that leads to more friction and more misunderstanding in our politics. And we do have a complex system to understand. And the founders designed it that way because they wanted it to be hard for people to change things because it was going to be a self-governing society.

So civic virtue is the other element of a self-governing society. Not just being well-educated, but being virtuous. And James Madison wrote about that in the Federalist Papers and others. What does being virtuous means? It means wanting to be a citizen who cooperates with other citizens, who recognizes you have different viewpoints than other citizens, but at the same time, you're going to engage in a peaceful, constructive process to understand these differences, perhaps find some common ground, perhaps not, but still find a way to move society forward through. In a pluralistic diverse society, which the US has always been, and many different peoples come from many different places to be here and have throughout our whole history, the real key to pluralism is to have a disposition, an attitude, a set of processes by which we can work through all those differences and still get things done as a society.

Manoj Mohanan:

Fabulous. And so I noticed when you talked about the role of institutions in civics versus the facts alone, how difficult is it to teach our students about ... The facts and figures are in some sense easier. When I was an immigrant coming into the US, I had to take the test you mentioned as well, there's a lot of facts in there. But then understanding the role of our institutions, the culture, as well as the history of those institutions and the salience even in society today, that's harder. So how do you navigate that in your teaching with college students going beyond the facts and getting them to grapple with the seriousness of the institutional aspect?

John Hillen:

Yeah. And you're right about the difficulty of it, and one of the things we talk about is trust in institutions. And we look at the polls over the past 50 years because Gallup and Pew Charitable Trust and others have been polling relentlessly on how Americans trust institutions. Every single institution in American life has gone down over the past 50 years in trust. In fact, there's only a few institutions that have above majority support from American institutions. And we ask why? What happened here? What are these elements? And we talk about the character of institutions, we talk about the leadership aspect of institutions. We talk about institutions acting in context, the context for which they were created and what they're doing. And then we look at the issues and we really drill down with an eye to understanding why people think differently, view life differently, have different value systems, and how these things come together and have to be worked in a democratic process.

I've been in 95 countries around the world, so for me, a lot of it is just comparative politics. And this is the most lightly governed and self-governing country in the world. That is a big power. And so it's in our hands and I tell the students, I'm like, "You are in the driver's seat. You're not just learning. You are in the driver's seat of this experiment and how you behave, how you absorb information, how you

understand your surroundings is really important because when you're in these institutions ..." And I have many seniors in this class, they will be in a couple of months, they'll be running the institutions of American life in a couple of months. You're going to be the ones who has to restore the trust by acting the right way. And I think they really take up the challenge. They seem excited about it. They don't want to be known as the generation that doesn't trust anything. I think they want to be known as a generation that rebuilds trust.

Manoj Mohanan:

That's fantastic. They give us hope.

John Hillen:

Yes,

Manoj Mohanan:

They do. So the commission that you're working on, the bipartisan commission, is the work of the commission going to change some of the way in which we think about these institutions or teach in our classrooms?

John Hillen:

Yeah. It's going to do a couple of things. One is there will be a manifesto, a call to action for American institutions at every level to take advantage of the 250th anniversary next year and just embrace and renew a commitment to civics and history for the reasons we've talked about it and many, many others. In some ways, as I mentioned, that movement's already out there. So I think the commission gets to ride a bit of a crescent, but it's not everywhere. You've seen in the big public universities there's been independent schools started to really drill down on the academic aspects of these things. I think the private schools are coming along. I was glad to see Duke start its own initiative related to it, both at the provost level and at the program level. But there's still a long way to go. Stanford has brand new initiative on civics and history that ties many things together on Stanford's campus, but there's still a pretty long way to go. So I think there's that aspect for the commission to do it.

We have people like Mitch Daniels and several other former college and university presidents, governors and others on the commission as well as academics. The other piece is we will publish a volume from eminent historians, citizen leaders and other public intellectuals and thought leaders about things that every American college student should know about American civics and history. It's not complete, it's not exclusive. There's too much knowledge to put in one book. But it is a series of essays from people including one I'm writing about American grand strategy over 250 years that just say, at the very least, you should know these things or at least here's a framework that'll enable you to organize your thinking, get your head around this quarter millennia engagement of this country with the rest of the world.

Manoj Mohanan:

Right. That's fascinating. I'm really excited to follow the work of the project and the proposals as they come together. Do you think our students would have an opportunity to engage with the work you're doing as well?

John Hillen:

Oh, absolutely. In fact, so I'm writing this one chapter, my friend H.R McMaster, who got his PhD down the road at UNC Chapel Hill is writing a chapter on American military history. And there's all sorts ... Political history, economic history, political theory and things in there from eminent scholars all over America. But in my particular case, I have been involved for years in the American Grand Strategy program here at Duke. So next year on the 250th, I'll lead what we call a staff ride to Yorktown for the American Grand Strategy Program here at Duke. And a staff ride is one of these great tools for getting students to have cognitive empathy about decision makers in the past. One of the ways I think sometimes we mis-teach foreign policy history is we set it up to be a tribunal and you're going to judge the past on the terms of the present and you're not really going to seek to understand what happened, you're going to seek to render a verdict. It was all tragic, it was all triumphant.

But it's always some sort of morality play. And a staff ride where all the students play a character from this episode in history, in this case, the closing of the big fighting part of the end of the American Revolution. And they stay in character and give them presentations about the kind of decisions they make on the battlefield at Yorktown, pointing out the terrain, pointing out the challenges, interacting with the other characters. It really makes them empathize with the leadership journey of these different people throughout history. And as you know, we do a number of these staff rides both locally at domestically and internationally for American grand Strategy. So in some ways, all the American Grand Strategy students I've encountered year have written this book chapter with me because they've informed my views of grand strategy.

Manoj Mohanan:

What a treat. What a treat. What I wouldn't do to be a student in that class. Maybe I can just come along for the-

John Hillen:

Absolutely.

Manoj Mohanan:

Okay. So since you're talking about grand strategy for our audience, can you help us understand what grand strategy is? What does it mean to have a grand strategy?

John Hillen:

Yeah. So when we talk about America's foreign affairs or any country's foreign affairs, sure the first thing that comes to mind, especially in places like a public policy school, is we think of the government. So in the case of the US we think of the state Department where I served, we think of the military where I served. We think of all the other apparatus and agencies of the government, international agency for development and so on. But as Ronald Reagan once said in his first inaugural address, we're a country with a government, not vice versa. And America always has been a place that is mostly private, not public, mostly commercial in its energies and orientation, not governmental.

Our government was really small for most of our history. And it is been a nation that's been civilian in its orientation, not military. I even show my students pictures of the big three conferences during World War II, the Alliance conferences. And only one of those commander in chiefs is not in uniform. It's the American, Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Stalin and Churchill are in uniforms. So it's the orientation, it's the nature, it's our strategic DNA that we're commercial, private and civilian rather than public, military and governmental. And so if you pull back the lens from just pure US government policy and you look for the

level of grand strategy, what does grand strategy bring to it? All the other elements of American power or influence in the world. Economic, informational, cultural, all those other things. I was told recently by someone in the know that high up in the Chinese government in the circles around President Xi, that President Xi had bemoaned that China didn't have a Taylor Swift or Manchester United.

Manoj Mohanan:

Oh wow.

John Hillen:

Some kind of cultural icon that would attract people around the world for its own sake, having nothing to do with politics.

Manoj Mohanan:

That's much like basketball at Duke.

John Hillen:

Right. Exactly. I spent some time in Africa last summer and a lot of the kids in Africa were wearing NBA jerseys. And so I had to tell Dan Silver Duke grad, the MBA commissioner that it's getting around. And the same thing in Asia, as you've seen. So cultural power. Nobody in the US government controls ... We're one of the few governments that doesn't have a cultural ministry or a ministry of religion and cultural affairs or something like that. So I think when you look at it through the lens of grand strategy, it expands all the elements with which America encounters the world. What's our expression on the world stage. It's not just governmental. It allows a much broader picture. And then grand strategy also expands things in time. So it looks at things over a longer period of time. And it also expands things in scale. So we look at periods of peace and war. So it's a much broader picture to look at the way that the US interacts with the world rather than this government policy or that government policy or something like that.

Manoj Mohanan:

Thank you. Thank you. That's very helpful. And let me paraphrase something you've said in the past about grand strategies. It could be a lighthouse where a leader points a country in a certain direction or it could be a reflection in the mirror. So as you think of our past, the last 250 years historically, what has our position on grand strategy been? Have we been the leader pointing towards the lighthouse or otherwise, or how would you characterize that?

John Hillen:

Yeah. No. It is a great question. So the research question, my chapter was why have we acted the way we've acted on the world stage for 250 years? What drove this? Was it just circumstance? Was it opportunity? Was it personality? It's all those things.

And so I was looking for frameworks for models. So I brought one from my friend Walter Russell Mead, the great foreign policy thinker. And he said there's two kinds of states operating in the world. The lighthouse state, where some smart person think Bismarck is at the top of the lighthouse. There's some group of smart people and they shine a light and direct the energies of the nation. This is our direction, this is our purpose. We're going to direct everything and we're going to marshal all our energies. And in the case of authoritarian surveillance states, which there are still many around the world ... Freedom

House says now only 21% of the world's population lives in some degree of political freedom. So there's plenty of states that can marshal the entire resources of a system and let's go in this direction. That's the lighthouse pointing the way.The US has always been more of a mirror state where whatever it does on the world stage reflects all of its society, it's energies, it's ambitions, it's inventiveness, it's restlessness, it's grittiness, it's contradictions. I point out in the chapter, we've always been a highly idealistic nation and we've always been a highly pragmatic nation. And you can see it in colonial times. And we've never thought there was a contradiction, or at least we're comfortable living with the contradiction. And that's just a uniquely American aspect.

So throughout our history, we've tended to reflect the entire country as opposed to some small star chamber of decision makers who then said, "We're all going this way and listen to me, and everything belongs to me, and I've got a plan." And de Tocqueville, one of the great observers of America once said, he said, "Ah, democracy, like in the US. So messy, so pluralistic, so many voices. They could never have a successful foreign policy because foreign policies need to be maybe a little bit secret. They need to be controlled, they need to be locked down." And in 200 years between 1789 and 1989, we went from an infant nation that could have been strangled in its crib to being a superpower that won the Cold War and all its other wars and even vanquished, every other competing ideology on the world stage. It's a pretty good track record. So what do we account for that? It's not the brilliance of government planners, which I was privileged to be for a couple of years. It's the full energy and talents of the nation at large. And our policies has simply reflected all that. And that's what I mean by a mirror state.

Manoj Mohanan:

So let me ask you to speculate a little bit here. So keeping the mirror state, the world is changing very rapidly. Everything from geopolitics to the climate to the rise of other powers, the countries that are today ranked the top five economies are not what it used to be 10 years ago. So in that changing geopolitical climate, including what's happening in our own country, what does the future of the American grand strategy look like? And do we continue down the same path? Do we take a different posture? What would your advice be?

John Hillen:

Yeah. We're definitely at an inflection point. There's been inflection points in American history, mostly driven by a pull as much as push. The pull of outside forces. One was at the turn of the last century, especially as we get into World War I, three times in the 20th century, the US went to Europe to get heavily involved in affairs on the Eurasian landmass, World War I, World War Two, and the Cold War all three times. The US went very reluctantly. It did not feel like a natural move for Americans in 1916 to enter World War I, which they did a year later. And as a result, both Woodrow Wilson and his Republican opponent both ran as peace candidates. They both promising to keep America out of the war. A year later, we were in it within a few months after the election, actually, we had declared war.

Same thing in World War Two in 1940 with London being bombed relentlessly every night Americans listening to the horror of the blitz on their radios, both Franklin Delano Roosevelt and his Republican opponent, Wendell Wilkie, ran as peace candidates promising to keep us out of European wars. Of course, a year later, Pearl Harbor and we were in Cold War, wanted to come home, we're done with that. And then back for the challenge of the Cold War, first with economic investment in the Marshall Plan, the NATO, and all the rest that followed. So there's a lot of Americans who want to say, "Gosh, I'm glad that period's over and we can come home and focus at home." Not as many as people think have been a part of polling in two organizations on these two nonprofits, on these board I served in.

Americans are much more confident of robust international engagement than I think American politicians think they are. So in some ways, the public is ahead of the politicians.

But there is a movement on both sides of the aisle to retrench a little and say maybe we've over engaged, maybe we need to focus on things at home. I would argue that the world's too interconnected to make clear distinctions between home and abroad, both economically, militarily and otherwise. And the other thing is Manoj, I always tell my strategy, students start with an external analysis so you know the playing field on which you might have strategic thoughts. And to me, when I look at the external analysis in the big picture, I see team authoritarian surveillance states, especially Russia, China, Iran, North Korea, and then team market democracies, and then a lot of people in between that don't want to be on either team. And it is not the only way to view the world, but it's the geopolitical shaping tool to see how it lays down. And I think that's a big challenge. I mentioned the statistics which are written ... I wrote a piece about freedom in Duke Magazine. But the world is not going in a more democratic, more open economic system direction. It's going the opposite way.

So I think that's something that we need to keep our eye on. I personally encourage robust muscular American engagement and leadership. I think that makes a difference. I believe that we operate with good intentions almost all the time, and we make the world a better place when we touch it, not without mistakes to be sure. But I think we're out there trying to do good things. And a world without American leadership, I think opens up a vacuum where people may not like the results and I think would ultimately affect American peace and prosperity. But that whole debate is right out there. Both parties and ever-present, every issue about the international affairs.

Manoj Mohanan:

And asking you to speculate a little bit more, the world as we just talked about also is changing rapidly in the sense of technology and thinking about foreign policy, national security and technology as it's shaping up, does our approach towards engaging with the world depend to some extent on what you think are the threats coming from technology as in the rise of state versus non-state actors? And how does that change our thinking about grand strategy?

John Hillen:

Yeah. It changes it tremendously because old grand strategy could be two-dimensional, great power, great power alliances, coalitions, a risk aboard the game of risk.

Manoj Mohanan:

Sure.

John Hillen:

Now of course, we have to think about space. We have to think about climate, we have to think about undersea. We have to think about the ether, the cyber world. I'm going to teach a course on technology and national security policy for both grad students and undergrads in the spring to really explore these issues. And oh, by the way, all those new dimensions, totally different ethical issues, totally different legal issues, totally different geopolitical and strategic issues, totally different issues for planning, for structure, policies. In fact, we'll do a policy simulation to sort all that out. But it really has become very, very complicated. And so yes it's not ... We used to have this expression, it's not your father's Cadillac anymore, and that makes the whole world more complex. The fact it's getting more complex is one

element. The fact it's getting more complex and I think more dangerous to American interest is a whole other problem. The two combined could be pretty challenging.

Manoj Mohanan:

Thank you so much. Thank you so much for your time today, John, and thank you for your service to our country. Our students are truly lucky to learn from you, and I hope I'll be able to join you on one of the staff visits that you mentioned. The Honorable Dr. John Hillen. We will have a link to his bio in our show notes. He's a faculty member here at Duke in our master of National Security Policy program, which is a one-year program for those of us who are working in national security, government, military defense consulting, wherever the students want to continue to work and get a master's degree at the same time. John Hillen is also affiliated with Polis, which is our Center for Politics, as well as the American Brand Strategy Program at Duke. His latest book is The Strategy Dialogues: A Primer on Business Strategy and Strategic Management. We'll be back soon with another conversation. Thanks again, John, for joining us today.

John Hillen:

My pleasure.

Manoj Mohanan:

I'm Manoj Mohanan.