Manoj Mohanan:

Hello, and welcome to Policy 360. I'm Manoj Mohanan, interim Dean of the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University. My guest today is Danny Werfel. Danny recently served as the 50th commissioner of the Internal Revenue Service, the IRS. He led the United States' Tax System, not once, but twice. That is a very big job. The IRS collects 4.1 trillion in tax revenues every year. In his most recent stint, Danny led a dramatic transformation of the IRS. They actually launched more digital solutions in a two-year period than the previous two decades combined. I'm especially proud because Danny got his graduate degree in public policy here at Duke, and is now back with us at Sanford as a distinguished fellow with Polis, Duke Center for Politics. So welcome, Danny.

Danny Werfel:

Thank you, Manoj. It's so great to be on.

Manoj Mohanan:

In fact, I should say welcome back, Danny.

Danny Werfel:

Yes, true. Durham does feel like home.

Manoj Mohanan:

Indeed. So Danny, let's start with your time at the IRS. What originally interested you in something that most people don't often think about, which is tax policy?

Danny Werfel:

I really, it came as a surprise to me as well. I left Duke and started my career in public sector at the White House Office of Management and Budget and actually spent most of my time in that space really tackling all kinds of government issues. But as I got older and had more years under my belt, I really started to get into the management and operation side of government. And in doing so, I started to gain a reputation a bit as a problem solver, a fire putter outer, if you will.

And that takes us all the way forward to 2013. President Obama is in the White House and there is a major crisis or scandal at the IRS. At this point, I'm serving in the number two role at OMB, so I'm the deputy director. I get called in to the West Wing, first to the White House Chief of Staff's Office and then to the Oval, and they asked me to leave my post at OMB and go put out a fire, which was a crisis at the IRS. So it was a much bigger problem that I'd ever been asked to solve before, but I had been training for a long time with smaller to medium-sized crisis and challenges in the government space. And so in doing that, I must have done a good job, because almost 10 years to the day after I left the IRS in the Obama administration, I walked back in to the IRS as the commissioner in the Biden administration, they asked me back and I became the commissioner again.

Manoj Mohanan:

Now, you mentioned about this crisis, the fire putter outer role that you had at the crisis. Is this something you can talk about publicly? Is this something known about what the crisis was?

Danny Werfel:

Oh, yeah, yeah. Yeah. It's actually fascinating given recent events. So what had happened was, it's a real lesson in campaign finance because what happened was the Citizens United Supreme Court decision came to pass. This dramatically led to an expansion of corporate and organizational donations into politics. And as it turns out, if you donate traditionally through a political action committee, you have to disclose that. But if you donate through a nonprofit, or what's called a 501(c)(4), then you can remain anonymous. And as a result, there was this dramatic increase in the number of applications to the IRS for 501(c)(4) status, and it overwhelmed the IRS. And one of the

things about being a 501(c)(4) is you have to prove and demonstrate that you're mostly not about politics, that a majority of your activity is more for social benefit rather than political aspiration.

What the IRS did, and did poorly, was they triaged the incoming applications, and if it looked or sounded political they set it aside. And as a result, when the inspector general went in and looked at their process, they found and reached the conclusion that the IRS appeared to be setting aside mostly conservative sounding organizations like the Tea Party of St. Louis. And this was revealed in a public inspector general report. And the allegation was that the IRS had been targeting conservative organizations for extra scrutiny, and letting more liberal or progressive organizations through.

And given that a Democrat was in the White House at the time, this exploded, it exploded in a way that there was an allegation of kind of a Nixonian use of the White House. And as a result, in this explosion, the previous leadership of the IRS resigned and there was a vacancy and someone had to go in and lead the organization both through the crisis and run the tax system. And it's hard to describe how big a story this was. I mean, there were protests on the streets in front of the IRS. When I was named the IRS commissioner, when I went home that night, there were television cameras waiting for me at my house.

Manoj Mohanan:

Wow.

Danny Werfel:

It was a big story. And back then, stories like this stayed in the headlines for weeks. I mean, we were front page news for about six straight weeks until Edward Snowden knocked us off the front page.

Manoj Mohanan:

Wow.

Danny Werfel:

So it was just a different time in terms of how media traced through our system.

Manoj Mohanan:

That's a fascinating story, Danny. So you mentioned that you were able to make several changes at the IRS. During this time that you just described during the Obama years, were some of these changes you implemented at the IRS during those times?

Danny Werfel:

Yeah. I mean, look, the first opportunity I had to go be IRS commissioner was a crisis. And the mission was to navigate through the crisis and that required changes. We completely overhauled our risk management program, we hired the first ever chief risk officer at the IRS, we redesigned the process by which (c)(3) and (c)(4) applications are reviewed and we're able to eliminate the backlog carefully and obviously eliminating any implications of bias, both optically or substantively in the system. So a lot was done that was built around this idea of restoring trust.

The second time, 10 years later, it was still a high stakes moment, but this was more of an opportunity than a crisis. And here, based in part on the scandal from 2013, the IRS had been struggling under years and years of budget cuts, and that had stagnated the organization in terms of its technology, customer service wasn't going well, they had anemic audit rates at every cohort or every level. COVID had really done damage to the system as well, the assembly line of the tax system was really stalling in a lot of different places coming out of COVID. And so the Inflation Reduction Act was passed to infuse billions in new funds into the IRS, to really rebuild it and turn it around and modernize it. The performance gaps were so extensive that frankly, members of Congress were just frustrated with people, taxpayers calling them for help because they couldn't get through to the IRS.

And so when I was approached, I asked just like I did the first time I was approached, I remember asking President Obama what the mission is for the IRS in this moment, I wanted to hear it in his words. This time when the White House called, I asked them, the White House Personnel Office and the associated individuals that were courting me into the role, what the mission was. And President Biden's chief economic adviser gave me the best answer. He said, "Your mission in this job is three things. First, the most important tech enabled transformation of a government agency in US history. Second, the responsibility and opportunity to implement a program that represents the largest investment in climate change in global history," which was the energy related tax credits of the Inflation Reduction Act. And third was to do this in the face of persistent and unrelenting political headwind.

And so when you hear a mission statement like that, it is humbling and inspiring. And there was no way I could say no to that. I was humbled that I would be, that there was confidence that I could take on the role in this moment. But so much excitement with funding, and a remit, and an agenda for change, frankly, I jumped at the chance.

Manoj Mohanan:

That's fantastic. And Danny, when you look back at those years, you were able to enact really big changes. The work you took on and were able to implement was phenomenal, staggering even. So what factors do you think you would attribute to your success in those years, apart from your own leadership, what else was helping you get work done?

Danny Werfel:

It was really helpful to have been at the IRS before.

Manoj Mohanan:

Okay.

Danny Werfel:

I was grounded in some of the fundamentals of the organization. I had learned lessons of things I would do differently. I was more attuned to the culture of the organization, how to get buy-in, and where some of the stakeholder issues, both inside and outside the IRS would potentially present obstacles to significant reform or change. I had grown as a leader and as a person, and I think earlier in my career I tended to be more risk-averse. And as I've gotten older, wiser, and more experienced, I tend to become more risk-preferred. And so I was able to push appropriate and aggressive agenda.

And by the time I came back in 2023, I had a really clear leadership philosophy that I had both defined for myself through trial and error and through this experience. And so it was the culmination of a lot of years, starting at Duke academically, moving into government and private sector roles throughout my career, and then being at the right moment in terms of tenure and seniority and experience, bring that all together to have a leadership philosophy and approach that took into account the unique challenges of the institution of the IRS in this moment. And so it was really like I had all the raw materials, all the ingredients, and I knew the cake that needed to be baked.

Manoj Mohanan:

That's awesome. This is more of a personal advice type of a question, because as I hear you talk about some of the challenges with dealing with institutional trust, challenges with trying to enact change at a moment of crisis, it starts sounding a little bit like what most academic leaders around the country today are facing. We are facing challenges with trust, we are facing challenges with finances, internal crisis that keep unfolding on a daily basis now in academia. So when I heard you talk about your own management philosophy and what you brought to the institution, could you talk a little bit more about how you inspired your colleagues to continue working on this change with you? Because you were shifting quite a few things internally. And how you're able to motivate your teams to work with you on a fairly large agenda of change.

Danny Werfel:

Well, I had a framework, and depending on who the audience was in the internal environment or the external to IRS environment, I would piece together an explanation of that philosophy. And I'll give you a couple of the pieces of it. First, was the philosophy that my goal was to look inward at the IRS, not outward. My legacy, I thought, and the legacy of many leaders, it should be that the employees of the organization feel like you did everything you could to empower and unlock their potential to meet the mission.

So I've worked for 14 different cabinet secretaries over the course of my government career. And some of them, their gaze focused outward. Not in a bad way, like, "What's going on out in the public? How can I have the most public impact?" But sometimes in a way that forgot, that it's the workforce that actually gets the job done. And so the best way to get your impact, your societal, your public policy impact is to make sure that your center of gravity is the organization that's going to do the work to get it done. By unlocking their potential, by resourcing them, by obsessive and relentless focus on the organization's health, you actually are more likely to achieve the external impact.

So I started there and tried to make sure that everyone understood that my job and my role was to do everything I could to empower the organization to meet the mission, versus me on my own meeting the mission. And then, in that context, I shared a philosophy that I had developed on change that went something like this, that I said, "When leaders come into an organization, they basically put things in three buckets. The first bucket is, 'Things are going well, I'm going to get out of the way.' The second bucket is, 'Things are going okay, but I'd like to nudge 10% faster, 10% bolder.' And then the last category is break glass, 'I've got to rip the motherboard out and restart.'"

And I think the mistake that a lot of leaders make, especially in public sector, is the biggest part of their portfolio is, "Break glass," and the smallest part is, "Get out of the way." And the reality is is that in most organizations there's a lot going on under the surface, that's fine. It may not be perfect, but it's directionally effective and doesn't really benefit, have a huge marginal benefit of the leader intervening and driving a course correction. And by signaling that to the workforce, you're signaling trust, you're making a bargain with them. You're saying, "Look, I am not going to reset the entire portfolio of work, I'm not going to throw all the babies out with the bathwater, I'm going to have respect for the work and the direction that you've been going. But in exchange, there are going to be areas where I am going to break glass, a small number, high stakes, and I'm going to need your support there."

And trying to create that transparency for the workforce so they have an understanding, "Okay, in these spots I have the commitment from the leader that things are going to go steady as she goes, as we continue to serve the public or make improvements. And in these, these limited number of areas. The commissioner or the leader has asked me to lean in for significant change." And that doesn't mean, Manoj, that I am dictating that change. We're going to work together on it, we're going to collaborate. We're going to design the new bridge, and how many spans of the bridge is going to be, and the time for when the first span is going to cross the waterway, we're going to do that together, but there will be a new bridge. And that's part of the commitment.

And so I think that philosophy, laid out like that, resonated. And it did allow me to get buy-in with a lot of the key leaders at various levels across the IRS, because they relaxed, they took a breath out knowing that the change that was coming would be clear, manageable, and that there were going to be many areas where I was not going to make change for change's sake.

Manoj Mohanan:

Right. And the making change for change's sake sometimes feels like it's a response to leaders wanting to demonstrate that they're doing something very visible. And that's why the break glass option becomes attractive, but it might not be the most effective in many circumstances, as you just described.

Danny Werfel:

Yeah. I mean, I think that is part of the philosophy, and there are shock and awe leaders that have been effective, it's just, it's not me and it's not my style. And I'm not here to suggest that my style is the right way. As I reflect, I'm my toughest critic, and as I reflect on my most recent stint at the IRS, I was probably still too risk-averse. Again, if I got a third try at this, the dial would push even more risk-preferred, more aggressive, but I wouldn't outdo it. Right? I'm an incremental leader, I think. And part of the reason I found myself pushing for increments was a lot of the times, especially when I was leading the IRS, someone would present a problem to me and I had the vision of

them standing on the shores of the Pacific Ocean saying, "I got to somehow figure out how to swim across this thing and it's impossible." And they're just studying it and feeling overwhelmed by it. And I'm like, "Just start swimming. Let's get out to the first buoy and then we'll go from there," because there's a paralysis in the analysis.

And so sometimes supporting an incremental leadership approach is actually necessary just to get the engine going. But again, there were moments where I could look back in my recent tenure and say, "Maybe I was too incremental." And so that is something that I'm always going to be looking to calibrate as I continue to grow as a leader.

Manoj Mohanan:

Yeah. Well, I'm personally rooting for a third term for you.

Danny Werfel:

It'll be the charm, for sure.

Manoj Mohanan:

Well, we have much to talk about. So let's maybe switch gears and talk a little bit about Duke, and what you're doing right now that you're back at Duke. So tell us a little more about what you're focused on while you're here at Sanford.

Danny Werfel:

Yeah, so what's really interesting is I left the government at 11:59 AM on January 20th, 2025, and had about, I would say, four days of silence, like touching the void. And then all of a sudden my phone started ringing, and that ring picked up, and it was, "Who was calling?" It was questions about, "What's going on?" When the Trump administration seized control of Treasury's payment systems, that was the first alarm that went off in government circles," What does this mean? What are the implications of that?" And during my time at OMB, I had to overset responsibility for payments, including treasury payment systems. And so I could begin to answer questions in terms of how these systems work and what it means to have direct political control, versus civil servant control over these systems?

The next wave of questions came around fraud and error, which I had a lot of experience as being the fraud and error czar, the improper payment czar for a couple of different presidents. And when the administration, the current administration announced the end of USAID, someone asked the president, "Do you have the authority to do that without an act of Congress?" And he said, "Yes, if it's fraud." And this raised all these questions like, "What is fraud? Is it objective, is it subjective?" And then I was on the shortlist of government experts that you could call and get the questions answered, and at least get an informed perspective.

Then obviously there was a lot going on with the IRS. There was the sharing of IRS data with ICE for immigration enforcement, there was a threat made by the administration on the tax-exempt status of Harvard University. And so a lot of questions about how to unpack all of this. And as I was talking to all of these individuals from senior media presence people, from members of Congress, to undergraduates working on research papers, I mean, all walks of life were calling me, I started to realize that America needs a civics lesson in chatting back and forth with people from all walks of life. It dawned on me how little people know about their government. And I felt like whether you are toasting a glass of champagne to all these DOGE actions and DOGE cuts, or you're upset and want to protest them, either way, you should be informed about what they mean. What does it mean to the operations of government to have such dramatic changes in size, scope, funding, purpose, et cetera? And so I started to think, "What role could I play in giving America a civics lesson?"

And so I started having conversations with your team about what that would look like. And we really didn't know when we started, but several students have signed up to meet with me when I come down and be my advisory board, so to speak, and help me answer questions on what we can and what I should do here with my time, and energy, and platform. And where we landed was to write a book about government and to make it accessible. It should be a book that all Americans could read, but in particular, at minimum, a middle school student who may

be bored with the monotony of a government textbook, should read it and they should feel in their bones, not just intellectually, but emotionally, how the government supports their lives in ways that are often invisible to them. Because when things go well, when the trash gets picked up on time, when the plane lands safely, when the water comes out of the tap safe to drink, all of this, it doesn't make a headline, it's just baked into our day. And it's only when there's a failure does the government make a headline.

And so therefore, we start to get a bit of a distorted view of government. We only hear about it when it's failing. And so when we hear someone say, "I'm going to take a chainsaw to the government. I'm going to break this thing apart. I'm going to rip it out, root and stem." You're like, "Well, yeah, why wouldn't you? It's so broken." But if you don't understand that 9 times out of 10, or sometimes 99 times out of 100, or sometimes 9,999 times out of 10,000, it's not broken.

Manoj Mohanan:

Yep.

Danny Werfel:

Those planes land, and that food is safe, and the list goes... And that 911 call gets answered. And so the idea was, "How do we make that case, not intellectually, but emotionally, to the broadest set of people?" And that's part of the journey that we're on, is figuring out how to construct such a document or in this case a book.

Manoj Mohanan:

Yep. So Danny, when I heard you describe this mission, the challenge that you describe is very much what we face in empirical research as one of defining and describing the counterfactual. That is, people can observe what's in front of them, but in order to understand the severity or the seriousness of what you're observing, you need to consider what might've happened otherwise. And that is so difficult. As somebody who travels outside the US a lot and spends a lot of time in countries where, just to take the example of things you mentioned, air safety might not be something we take for granted, or, "I rarely drink water out of the tap when I'm traveling in many countries in the world." Or, my favorite topic these days is to talk about the air quality in cities like Delhi.

It feels like, as we are trying to teach our middle schoolers the importance of governments, it also might be helpful for these middle schoolers to realize that there are other governments in other parts of the world that have not been able to deliver drinking water out of a tap or air that you actually want to breathe. Is some of this failure then a reflection of the fact that we were so successful that we took the success for granted, and now we have to somehow remind people that this is not something we take for granted?

Danny Werfel:

Exactly right. In fact, in chatting with my Duke student advisory board, we talked about this idea of juxtaposing international experience with domestic experience, and that's in the book, but it's not the center of the book. We decided to center the book here in the US and came up with a creative mechanism to display that counterfactual. And a large part of it is the power of storytelling.

And again, because if you set your sights on and you talk to eighth grade social studies teachers, as I have as part of this project, they will tell you that there's excitement around a plot driven explanation of something. If I say to you, "I'm going to tell you about the IRS, the mission statement of the IRS is as follows." Or I say it this way, "On a cold December night, Abraham Lincoln was chatting with his treasury secretary, and they were concerned about the fact that they did not have enough money to fund the Civil War." And I tell you a story, right?

Suddenly you're way more grabbed by the visual I'm presenting. You're picturing DC in the 1800s, you're picturing Abraham Lincoln, because the IRS was born during the Lincoln presidency as a way of funding the Civil War. And you could tell the story, the origin story of the IRS in a way, if you're a good storyteller, in a way that would have even the most easily bored eighth grader, you could get there. There's a way to do it. I'm not saying I know exactly how to do it, but I know there's a way to do it in a way where no one is dozing off or daydreaming. They're all in. And then there's a way to do it more traditionally, academically, on a whiteboard with the three branches of

government, and an org chart, and you're going to lose a lot of the students. That's just a reality. And so part of the challenge or the opportunity, I would say, is, "Let's meet people where they are." And it's not just eighth graders, it's everybody.

Manoj Mohanan:

It's everybody.

Danny Werfel:

I think by deciding that you're going to write a book that at minimum will get through to the eighth grader, you actually construct a piece of work that is accessible to the Duke PhD, to the Wall Street operative, to the working class firefighter, whoever. And my vision and my hope for this book, it's that it's the type of book that people want their father-in-law to read so that they can start discussing politics from at least the grounding of, "Hey, let's talk about politics, but let's talk about it from the vantage point of, 'We all can agree that the trash should be picked up on time, and planes shouldn't fly into each other, and the drinking water should be safe, and the air should be breathable,'" and that requires some degree of investment. We can't just rip the government, root and stem out, and still have these pieces in place. And how do you get that message across? And the idea is to do it by telling the story of the dark night in Washington DC with Abraham Lincoln and get everyone excited and attentive, versus doing it with an org chart.

Manoj Mohanan:

I totally agree, and I wish you luck with the book. One of these days I look forward to sitting at a Thanksgiving table and starting the conversation about politics, which right now, most of us are scared to without this book.

Danny Werfel:

Yeah, yeah. No, I know. I will say, and I'll take a more serious turn here if we have time. Which is, I happened to be on campus the week Charlie Kirk was murdered, and it was a remarkable set of moments for me to learn from students, seeing their reactions. There was a meeting at the Sanford School on this with students, and students I found to be genuinely concerned about the future of civil discourse. It was really inspiring. And there was questions raised by the students in terms of, "There are so many things we disagree on, how are we going to create civil discourse in a world in which we can't even start the conversation around a common denominator?"

And then I was thinking, "There are common denominators, though. We do want the trash to be picked up on time, and we do want safety in our airlines. And if the baby is trapped down the well, you're not going to call General Electric, or Cisco, or Google, you're calling the government." Right?

Manoj Mohanan:

Yeah.

Danny Werfel:

And so, I think to open up a better civil discourse environment, one of the things I took away from being at Duke that tragic week was how urgent and important it is to start building areas of consensus, even when these two people are never going to agree on gun control, these two people are never going to agree on pro-choice versus pro-life, these two people are never going to agree on LGBTQ versus not. Understood. But can we also add to the scorecard or the atmosphere, the areas where they do agree? And kind of lead people to those areas of agreement, rather than assume there's no areas of agreement.

Manoj Mohanan:

Yeah. And Danny, I do remember that particular meeting you talked about. I was in the back of the room for about 15, 20 minutes before I had to step away, and I remember you were in the room as well. I assume that as part of your current visits to multiple college campuses you've been seeing more of these conversations related to civil

discourse. Are students across the country talking about democracy as part of this conversation? The importance that we need to be giving to democracy at this point in time, and whether it's fragile or not? And what we need to do in public policy for democracy? Is that happening?

Danny Werfel:

They are. And in some cases I walk away from a conversation with an individual student or a group of students feeling a sense of hope because there is this fundamental anchor to democracy as the evergreen anchor that's going to take us forward. But in some of those conversations, Manoj, it doesn't feel that way. It feels that there is a part of the student bodies across the US that are of the mindset that things do need to be ripped out root and stem, not just like the current leaders of our government or the current political parties, but the very nature of our democracy. And that scares me. At the same time, we have to create an open environment for people to share these thoughts. And just because those philosophies worry me, and I feel almost a sense of desperation to change their minds, doesn't mean that I should run out the door. It means that we just have to work harder to figure out why this perspective has emerged, and figure out what is the critical path to build or rebuild even a stronger consensus on democracy as the way to take the country forward

Manoj Mohanan:

And in these conversations to take the country forward with democracy as the central principle we are trying to protect here, do students talk to you about the role of technology and how social media is informing how the news they get and the information they consume, and how that could be a big factor in all of this?

Danny Werfel:

It's omnipresent in the discussions. It is. I think about this all the time. I believe that we are at an inflection point as profound in our 250th anniversary, which is coming up this July, I believe we're at an inflection point as profound as the nation's founding. And in the nation's founding, one of the primary ways in which the country had a dialogue about its future, was through the Federalist Papers. And we have come so far from that. We live in a world that could not be different than that in terms of how we consume information, things are way more bite-sized, the information space is flooded. It's really hard to understand what the validity of a source is, whether it's evidence-based or not. And just the way in which people consume information, at all ages, and how it either crystallizes their thinking on something or breaks down that crystallization. We are in our infancy in really understanding how this plays out.

And a lot of young people or students really do point to the echo chambers of social media, the influence of social media, as something that they see as a profound barrier in creating a collective consensus across political lines on how to move the country forward. So we got to tackle it, and that's part of why the students today shoulder a big responsibility as they train to move into the workforce, and for some of them move into a fuller adult lifehood. They shoulder... I wish it wasn't this case. My children, I have one who just graduated from undergrad and a senior in college, and I've talked to them about what's on their shoulders, and I wish it wasn't as big as it is. But because we're at this inflection point, and because of the complexity of our information landscape, and AI, and social media, we might take a few steps back before we take some steps forward.

Manoj Mohanan:

Yeah. We need our next generation to come up with a better rubric to work with AI in ways that are productive, but at the same time be able to discern information better, which has always been a challenge, but made infinitely more complicated with the advent of AI, generative AI in this case.

Danny Werfel:

Yeah. One of the things I'm doing on my civics tour is I've started writing a column for Bloomberg, and I'm contributing an op-ed to them periodically. And in my most recent op-ed, I talk about AI and my concern that corporate algorithms, with these large language models, as we move more and more away from, "I ask the internet a question, it gives me a thousand sources, and a top 10 set of sources to go look, to answer the

question." You don't have to look to those sources, it gives you the one paragraph answer to your question. And that paragraph, the way it's developed, is an algorithm that is owned by companies.

And what I say in my op-ed is we need to start thinking about a peer-reviewed, trusted, large language model, that if you're an academic and you're teaching your students, I think I use the Boston Tea Party as my example, "We're going to do a deep dive into the origins, and the explanations, and the implications of the Boston Tea Party. But don't go to one of these popular, corporate LLMs or large language models, use this .org model or this .edu model, where there's a diverse set of leaders, global or otherwise, that have put in the right controls to make sure that the answer that's provided is the best possible, objective, evidence-based answer." It won't be perfect. Because I harken back to the World Book Encyclopedia, the Encyclopedia Britannica that were sitting on my shelves when I was growing up, and I'm not saying those were perfect. You could look back and find bias in them, and mistakes, and a version of history that should be updated. But there was a process to validate and try to get them as objective as possible, and that's what I think we need going forward.

Manoj Mohanan:

Yeah. Danny, we are getting close to time. So my last question for you is to reflect back at your time when you were here at Sanford as a graduate student. Is there anything that helped you make the transition to government, into the leadership roles that you took on after leaving Sanford? What part of your training at Sanford really helped you for that?

Danny Werfel:

I think the biggest thing was learning the importance of mentorship. Not whether it was the second years, when I was a first year, or the professors. I was fortunate enough to learn under the great Dick Stubbing, who is a legendary professor at the Sanford School. He taught budgeting. The Office of Management and Budget was not on my radar screen until I met him. He worked in the OMB, I think from the Kennedy years to the Reagan years, and then was a budgeting professor at the Sanford School. People like him, and Sunny Ladd, and others, the way in which they helped me understand public policy, the opportunities. I knew that having teachers like that, that I didn't want that to end.

And so I really encourage people when they get into the workforce, and even when they're deep in the workforce like me, more than a quarter-century later, I still need mentors. The lesson, the value that I got from a sit-down, one-on-one discussion with Dick Stubbing, I need that today, and as much as I needed it back in the early '90s when I was at Duke. So that is my main learning, is the importance of mentorship.

Manoj Mohanan:

Mentorship. Danny, thank you so much for joining me today. I'm very excited to see what you and our students will be dreaming up related to civics and democracy.

Danny Werfel:

Awesome. Thank you, Manoj. I love being back at Duke, and I'm excited about the project as well.

Manoj Mohanan:

Fantastic. Danny Werfel recently served as the 50th commissioner of the Internal Revenue Service, he earned a Master's in Public Policy here at Duke, and is now serving as a distinguished fellow with Polis, Duke Center for Politics.

Thanks as always to our producer, Carol Jackson. I'll be back soon with another conversation. I'm Manoj Mohanan.