



SENIOR FELLOWS AND FRIENDS

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Recap of Sept. 9, 2026 session: David Bray, Sue Gordon, and Ellen McCarthy Reflect on 9/11, Anthrax, and Modern Crisis Preparedness

Dear Senior Fellows and Friends,

During the week that marked the 25th anniversary of 9/11, it was a great privilege to host this free-flowing conversation among three dedicated experts who have had – and I hope will continue to have – enormous influence on national crisis preparedness. All are leaders of integrity, and none projects excessive gravitas. It was refreshing to be back in the land of my 7th-grade English teacher, with her insistence that our arguments be well-reasoned and fact-based. The vibe was reminiscent of good-government advocate Timothy B. Clark's early-morning conversations at the National Press Club during the years he led Government Executive. Like Tim, moderator David A. Bray modeled an incisive, unobtrusive style that draws people out and keeps things moving.

I took pages of notes that won't be regurgitated here, for two reasons. First, although the speakers geared their remarks to a group about half of which did not have a connection to national security or intelligence, this went quickly and there were a few things I didn't understand and don't want to get wrong. Second, these recaps tend toward the impressionistic. If you want more than that, then (as always) plan to be in the room. If you aren't receiving the invitations and this network appeals to you, then please ask me to add you to the mailing list.

Speaking of showing up, this session's round of self-introductions did not go very smoothly and I did not handle that skillfully. Our guests' reputations attracted first-time participants who may not have understood that this was not a webinar – that we all talk. A primary goal is to become known and trusted so that new

contribution can emerge. For example, our retired federal colleague in Rhode Island is working his mentoring magic on a third high-performer who's been suffering in the wrong job. We'll continue the self-introductions, although they could change shape – let me know if you want to try something new.

Here are some things I heard:

- I'm not sure the same things we did during 9/11 and the anthrax attack would work again
- Threats have changed, and so have we. Everyone has big power.
- Who's going to bear the cost? How will people respond when ...?
- We treated integration as an organizational problem aimed at counter-terrorism and not anything else. It didn't necessarily result in better decisions
- We missed a lot
- Sovereignty is morphing and economic power is much more situational. Capability is democratizing – advanced tools, technologies, and skills are accessible to everyday users when they used to be restricted to specialized experts. We're acting like we have power we no longer have – the power is distributed
- We're moving to shared values
- Although not necessarily shared data
- Do we have the right idea of governance, or does it need to change?
- The rule of law and the way we're governing is changing. National security is a moving target
- There's a tension between speed and legitimacy. The world is too fast and too big. Like Kodak, we've got to evolve
- We never addressed the role of Congress, one 9/11 recommendation that wasn't implemented
- Are we seeing that people don't want to be vulnerable, or have agency?
- A funny thing happened on the way to providing facts – people prefer their affinity group
- On the Intelligence Community: "It all requires judgment."
 - [KW note: William "Wild Bill" Donovan was mentioned a couple of times. Donovan received America's four highest awards: the Medal of Honor, the Distinguished Service Cross, the Distinguished Service Medal, and the National Security Medal. It would be worthwhile to look him up.]
- We are dealing with a very old-fashioned idea of risk
- The job is advantage, not secrecy
- We ought to reward insights and outcomes
- We ought to see what young employees bring, create an environment they want to be in, explain what the organization is really doing, and provide a vision of what the problem is and what their piece is
- We also need to keep late-career employees for their wisdom

- Do we measure the cost of doing nothing?
- Action is better than non-action
- Yeah, but what if we *could* measure?
- We should do policy and program in parallel
 - [KW note: Look up the Kent-Kendall Debate of 1949]
- Second-order effects are going to sneak up on you
 - [KW note: Read <https://fs.blog/second-order-thinking/>]
- Who are the people who are going to tackle big problems with long time horizons?
- There's always been a love/hate relationship between the Intelligence Community and policymakers. We need to promote creativity
- We don't have permission to fail
- Participant question: How does lack of information integrity affect trust? David's answer: What's new is its speed and volume. He used as an example the viral traffic on one FCC proposed rule (23M comments, of which 18M were political) while he was CIO there
- Last – and, in my opinion – best, “Self-actualization comes from serving your country.”

Bios, once again:

The Honorable Sue Gordon served as Principal Deputy Director of National Intelligence from 2017-2019, advising the President and leading the 17-agency Intelligence Community after a distinguished 27-year career at CIA spanning all four directorates. She previously served as Deputy Director of the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency, driving the agency's transformation to meet 21st century intelligence challenges.

The Honorable Ellen McCarthy served as Assistant Secretary of State for Intelligence and Research from 2019-2021, delivering critical intelligence to inform U.S. foreign policy during a pivotal period in global affairs. She previously served as Chief Operating Officer of the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency and played a critical role in moving the U.S. Coast Guard intelligence program into the Intelligence Community following 9/11.

Dr. David Bray served as IT Chief for the Bioterrorism Preparedness and Response Program at the CDC, leading the program's technology response to both 9/11 and the 2001 anthrax attacks. He later became a Senior National Intelligence Service Executive and Executive Director for the bipartisan National Commission for Review of Research and Development Programs of the U.S. Intelligence Community, receiving the National Intelligence Exceptional Achievement Medal.

Participant affiliations

American Society for Public Administration
ASPA National Capital Area Chapter
Arizona State University
Deloitte
Department of the Army
Department of Education, retired
Department of Homeland Security/FEMA
Department of Homeland Security/TSA
FutureTalk
General Services Administration
Graphite Health
National Academy of Public Administration
Old Dominion University
Stimson Center
Trust in Media Cooperative (TIM)
Understandable Insights: Information to Intelligence with Sue Gordon

Participants joined from Coimbra, Portugal, Palo Alto, CA, Bend, OR, Fort Huachuca, AZ, Austin, TX, Colorado Springs, CO, Mandeville, LA, Mt. Rainier, MD, Fredericksburg, VA, and the DC/MD/VA Metro Area.

Each time, we begin with a round of introductions to warm up the space. Please consider joining us in the future.

Sincerely,

Kitty Wooley
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