

Geointeresting Podcast

Episode 33: A conversation with former NGA Director Letitia A. Long

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Geointeresting: It's no secret that the intelligence community has long reflected a single demographic. And, while change doesn't happen overnight — especially in government — diversity and inclusion has moved to the forefront within the community and is viewed as a mission critical priority for the IC, even finding its way into the National Intelligence Strategy of the United States released earlier this year.

Rita Sampson: The IC views diversity and inclusion as mission critical priorities. Earlier this year, [ODNI] Director Coats released the 2019 National Intelligence Strategy. It lays out a number of national security priorities, including counterterrorism, combating cyber threats, and it also includes an imperative that the IC will forge and retain a diverse, inclusive, and expert workforce to address enduring and emerging requirements and enable mission success.

The mission case for diversity and inclusion is clear in the intelligence community — in order to solve the complex and difficult challenges we face, we must leverage diverse perspectives.

Geointeresting: That was Rita Sampson, chief of the IC's Equal Employment, Opportunity and Diversity Office, testifying on diversity across the IC before the U.S. House of Representatives Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence earlier this year.

So who better to talk about one facet of that diversity conversation — women leading within the IC — than former NGA Director Letitia Long?

Tish Long served as NGA director from 2010 to 2014, becoming the first woman to lead a major intelligence agency. She's known for — well, don't take it from me. Let's listen in to last year's Geospatial Intelligence Hall of Fame induction ceremony held at NGA's Springfield, Virginia, headquarters.

GEOINT Hall of Fame Emcee: Our next inductee is Letitia Long. Letitia Long is honored by induction into the Geospatial Intelligence Hall of Fame in recognition of her outstanding leadership and contributions to geospatial intelligence.

As the director of the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency, Ms. Long successfully led the opening of NGA Campus East in 2011, consolidating NGA's major East Coast operations into a centralized headquarters. She improved NGA's combat support by moving more analysts and staff into theater during the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Under her leadership, NGA played a critical role in the success of Operation Neptune Spear — the raid on Osama bin Laden's Abbottabad, Pakistan, compound. She is credited with transforming NGA's operations and tradecraft by making GEOINT more accessible to the customer. And, in addition to being the agency's fifth director, Ms. Long served in several key roles at the Office of Naval Intelligence, the Defense Intelligence Agency and the Central Intelligence Agency. A mentor and role model for employees across the agency, Ms. Long strengthened and enriched NGA leaders through the creation of the Leader Development program. She made substantial positive impacts to our nation's security throughout her extensive career and led the way for women in defense and intelligence. Ms. Long's significant contributions and selfless

dedication for the mission have earned her honor and respect, as well as a distinguished place in the Geospatial Intelligence Hall of Fame.

[Applause]

Geointeresting: On this episode of the Geointeresting podcast, we're talking with former director Letitia Long about the current state of women in the IC, taking mentorship to the next level, and what is most exciting about where the geospatial industry is heading. This is Geointeresting.

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Geointeresting: We're in a major moment in this country, where issues of women's roles, opportunities and advancement are dominating national conversations. As the first female head of a major intelligence agency, what is your perspective on the current state of women in the IC, and are there still areas for improvement?

Letitia Long: Well, I'll start off by saying there's always room for improvement. That said, 17 organizations in the intelligence community; eight of them are led — either the number one or the number two is a woman. So 50 percent — women make up 50 percent of the workforce. That's progress.

That said, only four of those organizations are actually led by a woman — a woman is in the number one slot. So that's why I say there is room for improvement. I believe we will be there when we're no longer talking about whether or not we have enough women or talking about the first woman to 'fill-in-the-blank'; that it's just natural.

Geointeresting: So what, from your perspective, do you think is the best way for women to help other women; you know, get to that point and help each other in their careers in the IC?

Letitia Long: So, I mean, first of all, it is as simple as helping other women. You know, we talk about mentoring. I also like to talk about sponsoring. So first of all, let me tell you what I think the differences are between mentorship and sponsorship. Mentorship is a very important relationship. And, you know, when you're mentoring someone, you're giving them advice, you're giving them feedback, you're being maybe asked to help the individual think through a particular situation — very important relationship. And I encourage individuals to have multiple mentors with very different backgrounds. Sponsorship is much more active. So it's actually sitting down with an individual, helping them map out their career — what might be a next step? — and then actually helping them achieve that. Whether that's specifically calling a colleague and introducing them to that colleague or as you're going about your normal daily routine and you see that a job has come up in that [you] think they might be really good for — you actually reach out to them and say, "Have you thought about applying to this job?" The same would go for a joint duty assignment in another organization or a long-term training opportunity. That wouldn't come up in a normal mentoring conversation, necessarily, because you're actually thinking about them, even when you're not sitting down in your one-on-one conversation. And so, you're really looking to sponsor them into particular activities. For me, I could give multiple examples where, while I really thought it was a mentoring relationship, it was probably more of a sponsorship relationship. As I was thinking about the next opportunity, and someone would pick up the phone and make a couple of phone calls or make an introduction. To me, it's a more hands-on, more active form of mentoring.

Geointeresting: And what is one leadership trait that you learned early on in your career that kind of impacted the way that you lead?

Letitia Long: So it's really hard to say just one leadership trait — but, certainly, humility; certainly, understanding that it's never about one individual. It's not about me. It's not about you. It's about the greater good; being a part of something larger than oneself. So I think humility is absolutely a necessity for a good leader. There are other things, also — I mean, integrity; having the utmost integrity and really standing by your morals and your ideals.

Geointeresting: What is one piece of advice that you give those just beginning their careers in this industry?

Letitia Long: Be true to yourself. That gets to that integrity. You know, at the end of the day, when you look in the mirror; I mean, that's what you have — your integrity. Trust your instincts. If your gut's telling you something, it's probably right. I think we tend to have pretty good North Stars. I mean, again, you've asked for one piece of advice, and that's really hard. But, I guess, for someone starting out, I would say work really hard to develop your area of expertise, make that name for yourself. Do your absolute best, and then you have that. You've made that name. And, as you build your network, folks know you're good at what you do, and they're going to seek you out — not only for that, perhaps, particular skill set, but because you've defined yourself, you've worked hard; [they'll] seek you out for other opportunities as well.

Geointeresting: I think that's such great advice. We hear a lot about generalists and things like that, and all of that I feel like it comes later in your career — you get those opportunities for leadership. But having that baseline of expertise for people, you make your name for yourself, and go people go to you for that. I think it's just, really, a solid perspective.

Letitia Long: The point you made, and I was actually going to elaborate on, the generalists versus specialists. We need both.

Geointeresting: Yes.

Letitia Long: And I really think before you become that generalist and move around a lot — which I did in my career — you need that base.

Geointeresting: Yes.

Letitia Long: You need that expertise that helps you establish your relationship.

Geointeresting: Something you're always going to fall back to.

Letitia Long: I mean, I spent eight years in running engineering programs and then program management. I crawled around submarines. I pulled cables. I went to sea. And while I didn't use that hands-on engineering all throughout my career — how you approach problems, how you run a program, how you establish schedule and budget, how many people you need — yes, I used that my entire career.

Geointeresting: On the flip side, what is the worst piece of advice that you've ever been given? This is a question that we got from a popular email newsletter, The Skimm. Has there [been] anything where you've been like, "Ehh." Like, "That did not work out. That's not going to work out."

Letitia Long: So In my mind, the worst piece of advice, and maybe the only bad advice, was before I started my career. It was from my freshman adviser in college.

Geointeresting: Oh.

Letitia Long: Who recommended that I not pursue engineering, because, of course, "Women don't make good engineers." I didn't follow that advice. I trusted my instincts. I made sure I aced his class when I actually had him for a professor later that year, and, in fact, I never went back to see him again. Not good advice. You don't burst someone's bubble the first time you meet them. You certainly don't talk about what anyone can or cannot do before you even know them or understand them. And so, it gets back to that trust your instincts.

Geointeresting: Now pivoting away from kind of leadership things. What are you most looking forward to seeing the GEOINT industry accomplish? Are there any trends that you are seeing that you never thought would be possible when you were appointed NGA director?

Letitia Long: So I would say, it's in the arena of artificial intelligence. I wouldn't say that I never thought it was possible. I didn't anticipate the strides that are being made as quickly as we are making them. And I think that comes down to the processing power that's available today that wasn't available two years ago, five years ago. And so, it's really enabling the ability to take in so much data and make sense of it. And so, to me, that is so exciting — to be able to free the analytic workforce up to really focus on what's changed and not be mired down in 'nothing's changed, nothing's changed, nothing's changed.' You know, let's harness the power of automation. Let's harness the power of analytics to free up the analysts to do what they do best.

Geointeresting: Hottest topic around here is what's going on in St. Louis. Discussions to build a new facility to replace NGA's campus in St. Louis began while you were director. Can you talk a little bit about what it's been like to see that process play out and positively affect not only the agency, but an entire region?

Letitia Long: I think it is just extremely exciting — I mean, everything that N2W has to offer for St. Louis. I mean, first of all, aside from the jobs that it brings just from a planning, design, construction and everything that goes into that facility standpoint — that's huge. That's huge for any city. It's huge for the region. On top of that, the city is really taking advantage of the opportunity it presents and working to establish themselves as our nation's center for geospatial intelligence. That's huge.

I've really come to love St. Louis, and so, if they really can capitalize on that and become the geospatial intelligence sector — they say they want to be what Silicon Valley is to tech. That's what they want to St. Louis to be for geospatial intelligence. And, of course, they're talking about it much broader than when we think of NGA and GEOINT. I mean, they're really talking about location-based services. They're talking about precision agriculture. They're talking about how you can apply geospatial intelligence to research and academia. I think the sky's the limit when it comes to that. So it's very exciting to see the city really

come together and bring so many parts of the local government, as well as attracting more industry there. The future's bright.

Geointeresting: Along those lines of what's exciting right now, what most excites you about where the industry is going, having seen it both now from the commercial and government side?

Letitia Long: So I'll link it back to an earlier question, and that's the compute power being finally available today to be able to operate on so much data at once — disparate data, putting it together to really be able to put the power of GEOINT in the hands of the user, something that that we talked about when I was here at NGA. And what that necessitates is the public-private partnership. So NGA has not had the corner on the market of geospatial intelligence for a long time. And as more and more industry builds commercial satellites or just provides location-based services or visualization, the partnerships that have really come into being between NGA and industry and academia are so critically important. NGA can't do it on [its] own — and let me add the partnerships of all of our international partners, as well. We all know diversity brings better solutions, better products, better services. So, the diversity of NGA working with all of those many partners — there's a lot to be said for that.

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Geointeresting: Thanks for joining the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency for another episode of our podcast, Geointeresting. Like what you heard? Join us. Check out all our current NGA career opportunities at intelligencecareers.gov. This is one case where an intelligence agency wants you to spread the word. Tell a friend about Geointeresting. Look for us on your preferred podcasting platform or on YouTube or read a transcript of the episode at [NGA.mil](https://nga.mil). This episode's music was courtesy of Lee Rosevere from his aptly named album, "Music for Podcasts," available on the Free Music Archive. Thanks, and we'll see you next time.

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