

Q&A on Diversity With Next Defense Secretary Leon Panetta

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Leon E. Panetta, the director of central intelligence, is expected to be named defense secretary by President Obama this week.

"The die was now cast; I had passed the Rubicon. Swim or sink, live or die, survive or perish with my country was my unalterable determination." —John Quincy Adams

This timeless quote sums up the political career of Leon Panetta, the son of Italian immigrants who was destined for public service. Rising from U.S. Army JAG officer to director of the Office for Civil Rights, Panetta was appointed White House chief of staff in the Clinton administration and director of the U.S. Office of Management and Budget ([OMB](#)), where he helped develop the balanced budget package of 1998. Most recently, Panetta was sworn in as director of the [Central Intelligence Agency](#) by President Barack Obama.

How is this outspoken champion of civil rights building a diverse slate of intelligence officers who are driven to serve? What fundamental lessons does he offer other leaders? DiversityInc CEO Luke Visconti sat down with Panetta to find out. Here are excerpts of their conversation.

Luke Visconti: Can you elaborate on your feelings about values and serving our country?

Leon Panetta: Our democracy doesn't work unless there are those who really commit their lives to this country. To me, it was reinforced because my parents were immigrants from Italy, like millions of others. When my father was asked "Why would you come all of these miles to this country?" he said it was because he believed he could give his children a better life. This is really the fundamental American dream.

That doesn't happen unless people are committed to improving our system, to making our government better, to making our democracy better. It's the only way to give our kids a better life, and that's the investment. To a large extent, my parents benefited from the sacrifice that a lot of others made in this country to give them that opportunity. They basically said to us that we owe the same sense of sacrifice and duty to the country because of the opportunity that they were given by this country. So from the beginning, I always had a sense of public service. It's also fulfilling because of the people that you help, the lives that you can make better from what you do. Public service is probably the most fulfilling thing you can do in life.

Visconti: How does that connect to why this country is so successful?

Panetta: When the words were put down in the Declaration of Independence that we're all created equal, that was more a promise than a fulfillment at the time, a vision more than reality. But in many ways, it's at the heart and soul of what our country is all about. Starting with our forefathers and continuing with the pioneers and the immigrants, it was about a sense of community. It was about making sure that we were working together to improve the lives of the people in our community. I think it was recognition that we are not truly equal; we really don't enjoy success or opportunity unless everybody has that opportunity, that ability to succeed. When we discriminate [and] undermine the ability of people to succeed—either because of their race, creed, sex or sexual [orientation]—that ultimately hurts *all* of us. The key to our democracy is we are at our best when we recognize that we have to reach out and help others succeed. That helps us all succeed.

Visconti: You helped drive the desegregation of public schools. Can you talk about education and opportunity in terms of fairness?

Panetta: As an Italian American, to a large extent, you're part of a minority. Just because you're white [doesn't mean] you automatically fit in. You don't. I always had to kind of fight my way through discrimination. As the son of immigrants whose parents didn't speak very good English, I understood that side of it. Then I went to the South when I was a lieutenant in the Army in the early '60s. For a kid who was raised in California, where there are communities [and] you really do live together and there isn't that sense of segregation, to go to the South where there was segregation—it impacted me. Then I went up the East Coast for training in intelligence school in Baltimore, which in many ways was a segregated city. I saw that in very blatant terms. Then, when I came back to work as a legislative assistant, the senator [California's Thomas Kuchel] I was working for was very involved in civil-rights legislation. That's where I got directly involved in the legislation that, ultimately, I then enforced as director of the Office of Civil Rights.

I really believed that you're not going to achieve equality in this country unless you provide equal education. The key to opportunity [and] success is equal education. If you get a good education, in many ways that solves your civil-rights issues. It gives you the key to opening opportunity for the future. So what I got involved with as director of the Office of Civil Rights was taking these kids who have been segregated in separate schools for the past 200 years and trying to break down walls so that not only do you desegregate the system but you create quality education for these kids to succeed.

It was not easy taking 200 years of history and breaking it down. There was a lot of resistance, a lot of tough challenges and a lot of people who said this will never happen. Yet what I saw in those districts that really did engage was leadership and public service. Public service involves taking risks and a lot of sacrifice that may come back to hurt you if you're doing what you think is right. So the leadership that was involved in some of these communities—where they had to basically desegregate these schools and get black kids for the first time to go to white schools—tested what this country was all about. The only way we're going to get there is by breaking down racial barriers that have been there for a long time. It was a challenging job. But I knew that if ultimately I could get that better education and help them succeed, I was giving these kids a better life.

Visconti: What does a failure of leadership cost?

Panetta: In a democracy, we're governed either by leadership or crisis. And if leadership is there and people are willing to take risks and make the sacrifices that are necessary, you either avoid crisis or get your arms around it to make sure it doesn't hurt the country. But if leadership is not there, then crisis drives policy. Largely, crisis drives what's happening in our country. But the political leadership, the willingness to come together, to take on those tough issues, to work together to find a consensus, that's the only way we govern in our society. [Conversely], the unwillingness to do that means that, ultimately, crisis continues to govern and you pay a price. The price you pay is that you lose the trust of the American people. I think people don't believe that our system can solve problems. Whether it's tea parties or people who are angry, it's about that frustration, that lack of trust in what's happening. If the people we elect aren't willing to take on these tough issues, then more anger and distrust is going to develop. And in many ways, that will determine whether this country will be able to move forward in the 21st century or whether we're going to follow the path of other empires.

Visconti: What's required of leadership?

Panetta: When you work together [and] solve problems, that's the best politics. But I don't think a lot of people in politics believe that governing is good politics; they believe that it's sound bites, attacking each other and tearing each other down. I was in the Democratic Congress and [served under] a Republican president, [and] what we found was if we worked together ... we could solve issues. It involved some compromise and consensus. I sat through four or five budget summits with Republicans, the administration, Democrats to work through some very tough issues. It involved taxes, cuts and things you have to do in dealing with deficits. But in the end, we were able to make an agreement where we came together as Republicans and Democrats—and that not only helped the country, that helped us politically. Somehow, we've got to get back to ... a view that it's not about scoring points. It's really about what you are doing to fix the country. That's what people in public office have to embrace: They aren't elected to simply survive in office. They're elected to go out and take risks.

Visconti: What do you bring to this organization?

Panetta: This organization represents what I fought for. This isn't an organization that's Democratic or Republican; it's an organization that's committed to a mission. This place reflects people who are real public servants because they aren't in it for power or for party or for sheer ego. They are in it because they really care about the country. So it's a perfect fit for me because I always believed throughout my career ... that it was about doing what you think is in the best interest of the country—and that is really what this place is about. That's the mission the CIA performs. It's not about having to come in and politically manipulate this place to try and serve political interests. For me, it's easy to fight for the CIA because I think the people here really try to ... implement a mission that involves the protection of the country. That has made it a fulfilling responsibility. But this is a challenge. In my career, I looked at a lot of tough challenges, whether it was as officer of civil rights or chairman of OMB. But the most rewarding part is the people who work here because they're committed. That's why I want to make sure this place reflects the nation we serve and the diverse world that we're in, because the CIA will be a much stronger operation the more diverse we are.

Visconti: When you talk about diversity, how are you managing this?

Panetta: Our mission is to gather intelligence throughout the world so that we can present the best intelligence to the president of the United States so that the president can make the best decisions. You can't get good intelligence without understanding the world that we're in, without reflecting the ethnic background of the world [and] relating to the nations that we're involved in. That can be done by birth, by having been a part of that country and that region. But the other piece of that is language, [which] is very important to being able to understand other countries, what they're thinking, what they're saying. I grew up speaking Italian because my parents spoke Italian. Understanding Italian for me came from visiting my relatives in Italy and being able to speak Italian; it gave me the ability to understand what they were really about. There are times now when I have to do things through an interpreter, and you can get it, but you don't really understand what somebody is about without the language. That's why I'm big on language; it's key to ... good intelligence. That's why diversity is important because this place cannot really understand what's happening in Africa, Asia, the Middle East unless we have people who by virtue of family, of backgrounds, have a sense of what that culture is all about.

Visconti: How are you holding people accountable for diversity?

Panetta: You can't just order it. You have to make sure people really believe it's in their interest. [Former President Bill] Clinton used to always say when he was engaged in foreign policy that the key is not to tell people what you want them to do; it's to make them understand their interest to do what you want them to do. If you can do that, then you're going to be able to [have an] impact. The way the CIA has to do it is for me to convince [intelligence officers] that we're going to be much more effective in what we do if we have diversity, if we have language training in the intelligence business ... What I have argued is it really is about a CIA that reflects that of the nation and reflects the world that we're operating in. That's what I want to achieve.

When I was involved in civil-rights enforcement, you had to make the argument that this is what this country is about, it's what the law requires [and] it's in the best interest to ensure that everybody has equal opportunity and equal rights. You also have to set goals and targets to make sure they accomplish it. And it's that combination that gets you there. I've set goals of 30 percent [Black, Latino and other underrepresented groups in the CIA]—and we're going to do it! We've got new classes coming in that are now 32 percent in terms of the minority, and there are more kids coming in that want to get involved. More than 50 percent of people who work in the CIA came in after 9/11.

If you go to our cafeteria, it's like a college cafeteria. A lot of young people, very dedicated and committed. We get almost 400 applications a day. There's a lot of interest. When a James Bond movie comes out, we get even more. What that says to me is that [racial/ethnic representation] is doable, because if we're getting that many applications, it's not just coming from the white community. That's why we've got to reach out to all communities to make sure they're aware of what this place is about. That's why I go to historically Black colleges and universities, why I'm going to do Latino groups and why we're going to continue to do outreach. It's about letting them know what the CIA is all about. There are a lot of misconceptions out there. But what I'm finding out is that people do get it. For all the bad raps that are out there about the CIA, deep down they know that this is a place that's committed to trying to protect them.

Visconti: What can people expect once they get to the CIA?

Panetta: The most fulfilling thing you can do in life is to make a difference. In many ways, the test for all of us is whether or not people say, when they're saying their last words, that this person really made a difference. In this place, you can.