Hadeil Ali: Thank you so much for joining us either here in person at CSIS or online.

My name is Hadeil Ali, and I’m the director of the Diversity and Leadership in International Affairs Project here at CSIS. DLIA is the hub for all diversity, equity, and inclusion related efforts at CSIS. Since its inception in 2017, the program has been dedicated to elevating diverse voices and perspectives. CSIS believes that a diverse workforce leads to more ideas, more innovation, and more robust policy solutions. We strive to be a thought leader within the DEI and national security space, all while supporting internal DEI initiatives within the Center.

Last year in June 2022, the State Department appointed Desirée Cormier Smith as the State Department’s first special representative for racial equity and justice. The position was guided by two mandates. One, protect and advance the human rights of people belonging to marginalized racial and ethnic communities. And two, to combat systemic racism, discrimination, and xenophobia around the world. Now, a full year later, to commemorate this anniversary DLIA is honored to host the special representative at CSIS for a timely discussion on her accomplishments, what’s to come, and the importance of racial equity in foreign policy and diplomacy.

Prior to her appointment, Special Representative Cormier Smith served as the senior advisor in the department’s Bureau of International Organization Affairs, along with previous positions with Open Society Foundations as the senior policy advisor for Africa, Europe and Eurasia, and Albright Stonebridge Group’s Africa practice as senior director. Ms. Desirée Cormier Smith began her career as a foreign service officer at the State Department with assignments in Mexico, South Africa, and Washington, D.C.

Ms. Cormier is the recipient of four State Department Meritorious Honor Awards, the Thomas Pickering Foreign Affairs Undergraduate Fellowship. She’s an alumnus of the International Career Advancement Program and is a member of the 2019 class of Next Generation National Security Leaders Fellowship at the Center for a New American Security. She was honored by New America as a 2020 Black American National Security and Foreign Policy Next Generation Leader and is a 2020 alumnus of the New Leadership Council Washington, D.C. chapter.

Ms. Cormier currently serves on the Advisory Council of Global Kids, an educational nonprofit aimed to inspire underserved youth to pursue careers in public policy and foreign affairs. And on the advisory board of Shea Yeleen, a social enterprise dedicated to empowering women in West Africa and the United States. Ms. Cormier is a term member of the Council on Foreign Relations. And she’s received degrees from both Stanford and Harvard University. We’re honored to have you join us here today.
I’d like to now welcome to the stage Special Representative for Racial Equity and Justice Desirée Cormier Smith for her keynote remarks. (Applause.)

Desirée Cormier Smith: Thank you so much, Hadeil. And good afternoon, everyone. I know it’s Friday afternoon, but good afternoon, everyone.

Audience: Good afternoon.

Ms. Cormier: All right. This is exciting. It’s my one-year anniversary or one-year birthday, however you want to call it. But I’m so honored to be here with you all this afternoon. As Hadeil said in that very gracious introduction, my name is Desirée Cormier Smith, and I am honored to be the State Department’s first-ever special representative for racial equity and justice. Thank you all for joining us here in person and online for this fireside chat to reflect on the first year of this historic role, which I am honored to occupy.

It has been almost exactly one year since Secretary Blinken announced the creation of this position and appointed me to this role. And I’m grateful to our friends here at the Center for Strategic and International Studies Diversity and Leadership in International Affairs Project for helping us to celebrate the first of what hopefully will be many more anniversaries to come. I would also like to pause to acknowledge that we are gathered here this afternoon on the ancestral lands of the Piscataway and Anacostan peoples. We honor their contributions and resilience today, and I pay respect to their elders both past and present.

As the special representative for racial equity and justice, as Hadeil said, my mandate is twofold. First, to ensure U.S. foreign policy, processes, and programs promote and advance the human rights of people belonging to marginalized racial, ethnic, and indigenous communities, including people of African descent. And to build global partnerships to combat systemic racism, discrimination, and xenophobia around the world. Not because we have solved these challenges yet in the United States, but because we recognize that these are global challenges that will require global and coordinated solutions.

My mandate was created because the Biden-Harris administration acknowledges the global nature of systemic racism. Yet, there are many people who may question the need for our diplomats to focus on racism in other countries. Why should the State Department be spending time, energy, and resources examining the effects of systemic racism in promoting equity around the world? Well, one reason is that the State Department’s top priority is the protection of Americans and American interests.

We are doing this work because our country is diverse, and multiracial, and multicultural. This work is about helping to combat racism, discrimination,
and xenophobia everywhere for the safety of U.S. citizens inside and outside our borders. We are doing this work to promote inclusive development, representative democracy, human rights, and political and economic stability around the world. And that is good for everyone.

Another important reason my role exists is because while we acknowledge the very real and ongoing challenges we are facing here in the United States to fully address the long and lingering legacies of the forced relocation of Native Americans and the enslavement of Africans and their descendants, we also recognize that these challenges are not unique to the United States. It's not just us. Structural racism, discrimination, and xenophobia are global scourges that require global solutions. As the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Türk put it plainly, and I quote, “no country in the world is free of racism,” end-quote.

After one year in my job, I can attest to the importance of taking a critical look at our foreign policies, processes, assistance, and programs to identify ways we can better advance the human rights of members of marginalized racial, ethnic, and indigenous communities, including people of African descent, and more effectively combat systemic racism, discrimination, violence, and xenophobia globally.

This work is important. But this work is also really hard. And that is why I’m really grateful that it has been a huge team effort. I attended an event at the National Museum of African American history and culture a few weeks ago. And someone from civil society, a Brazilian woman, gave me a shirt with a phrase in Portuguese. Now, I don’t speak Portuguese yet, so when I got to my office I looked it up. And the text on the shirt translated to “Justice is a Black woman, and she does not walk alone.”

And I thought it was so profound and so meaningful, as a Black woman. And it also made me reflect how this work has been and must be a collective effort in order to be successful and sustainable. Each of us here today in our various respective fields must all work in concert to uproot systemic racism and all forms of discrimination from our society and our global community. When bigotry, hate, and indifference win, we all lose. But if we harness the power of our collective brilliance in pursuit of a more equal and a more just world, we can build a better world than the one we’ve got now.

Our president often says our country and the world are at an inflection point. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice. And I would add that we have to be the ones to bend it. My team and my colleagues at the State Department are doing this work not only because it’s the right thing to do. Our nation will unquestionably be safer and more prosperous when we address the deeply rooted inequities that are caused by racism around the world.
When we defend the rights of all people, all human beings around the world, of women and girls in their diversity, people of African descent, LGBTQI+ persons, indigenous peoples, persons with disabilities, and people of every ethnic background and religion, we promote stronger, more representative democracies, more stable societies, more prosperous economies, and more peace and stability. And again, that is good for everyone. I’m really looking forward to this conversation today on how racial equity and justice is a core pillar of democracy promotion, of human rights, and of U.S. national security more broadly. Thank you. (Applause.)

Ms. Ali: Thank you so much, Desirée, for that. Before we start our conversation here today, a couple things. You are an – (inaudible).

Ms. Cormier: I am.

Ms. Ali: I am as well. You did it, you said, 2015?

Ms. Cormier: Yes.

Ms. Ali: A fantastic program that I’m grateful for, and for its network. You also talked about Global Kids.

Ms. Cormier: Yes.

Ms. Ali: A fantastic organization that CSIS has had the honor to partner with in the last couple years as well.

Desirée, I know you alluded to some of this at the beginning, that context that led to this role. I’m sure for some people that might have been a surprise, but for others it was a long way coming. Could you share a little bit more about the context and some of the challenges that led to the importance of creating this role?

Ms. Cormier: Yeah. Well, you know, this was not an overnight effort, right? To be clear, this role was created thanks to the decades of advocacy and activism from people inside and outside of the State Department to acknowledge the realities of systemic racism as a national security imperative, to acknowledge that for people of African descent, for indigenous peoples, for Roma people, their human rights are consistently and systematically denied simply because of their race or ethnicity.

And so, it was a great honor to be asked by Secretary Blinken to assume this role in June of 2022. I must also – I think I would be remiss if I didn’t acknowledge, I think, the propelling effect that the murder of George Floyd had on the conversations about racial inequities and racial injustices around
the world. Not just in our country, right, but following the murder of George Floyd we saw the EU establish an EU antiracism coordinator.

We saw Canada stand up an antiracism secretariat, right? We saw the Human Rights Council in Geneva, led by the Africa Group, and U.S. civil society, frankly, put forward a historic resolution calling for the creation of an independent mechanism to look at the realities of systemic racism in law enforcement globally. Not just in the United States, globally. So we were seeing these conversations around the world that encouraged people to no longer sort of wish racism away, right, or ignore racism away. And so I think that was also a propelling movement or an event that sort of built upon the decades of advocacy.

And, you know, I would also be remiss if I didn’t talk about President Biden’s commitment to advancing racial equity through his entire administration. So, on his very first day in office, he signed Executive Order 13985 on advancing racial equity and support for underserved communities. That mandated a whole-of-government approach to identifying barriers to opportunity for members of marginalized – historically underrepresented and marginalized communities. That includes people of African descent. That includes indigenous peoples. That includes LGBTQI+ folks, right? So, this is equity writ large. And so, the creation of my position was a part of that commitment under President Biden’s mandate from that executive order.

Ms. Ali: Thank you. I’m sure, like with any new role, there’s a period of adjustment, of learning. This was particularly unique, because you were not just learning the ropes, you were also developing this role from scratch – the strategy, the mission, the goals. What were some of your guiding principles and mandates for yourself and for your team?

Ms. Cormier: Yeah. That’s a really good question. You know, my team and I always say, like, we’re not starting from zero. We’re starting from negative. Because this really is frontier work for the State Department. And so a lot of the work does entail internal sort of advocacy and education, helping our colleagues understand not only why this is a foreign policy imperative, but also how they do it in a meaningful way in their work across regions, across thematic areas.

And so what helped a lot was building upon the work and learning from – my counterparts focus on other marginalized communities, right? So I’m really honored to join the ranks of other principals and specials and ambassadors focused on other marginalized communities. That includes Ambassador Geeta, our newly confirmed ambassador for Global Women’s Issues, Jessica Stern, our special envoy for LGBTQI+ rights, Sara Minkara, our special advisor for international disability rights, Rashad Hussain, our ambassador-
at-large for international religious freedom, and Deborah Lipstadt, our ambassador to monitor and combat antisemitism.

So I joined them. And collectively we are putting – we’re making good on President Biden’s and Secretary Blinken’s promise to put human rights at the center of our foreign policy. Because we have to acknowledge that for members of marginalized groups, again, that premise – that basic premise outlined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, that all people are born free and equal in dignity and rights, is still an aspiration but not yet a reality. So building upon their lessons, using their goodwill, and leaning upon them, and getting their guidance has been critical.

But then at the core of this is engaging with and listening to marginalized racial, ethnic, and indigenous communities themselves. That is so important, for a number of reasons, right? One, we cannot and we will not apply an American lens to this global problem. Nor can we apply a one-size-fits-all to this problem. So while racism is a global problem, we know that it manifests very differently in every country in the world. And so if we try to take a sort of one-size blanket approach, it would fail. So that means it’s harder. But, if we do it right, it will be more impactful.

And in order to do it right, we have to listen. We have to engage with. We have to partner with communities of African descent, indigenous communities, Roma communities, other marginalized ethnic and racial communities wherever we are, and talk to them. Because they know better than any of us the challenges that they’re facing, and what they need in terms of U.S. government support or what we can be doing better to help them achieve equality and justice. They simply have just for far too long been excluded from the conversations that impact them.

And so one thing that my colleague Sara Minkara, special advisor for international disability rights, always says is a common phrase of the disability community is “nothing about us without us.” And she actually likes to shorten it and say, just nothing without us, because everything is about it. And I steal that, because it’s true for members of marginalized racial, ethnic, and indigenous communities. Everything impacts us, so there should not be a conversation where we are not a part of it.

Absolutely. You make an excellent point about listening to them directly, not making assumptions, understanding those nuances. You also mentioned Special Envoy Jessica Stern. We had the honor to host her last year for an event here at CSIS. Desirée, you talked a little bit about internal advocacy and some of your partners at CSIS – excuse me – your partners at the State Department who focus on elevating historically marginalized, disadvantaged, or underserved communities. Where do you see your role fitting into these different individuals and their work at the State Department?
Ms. Cormier: Yeah. Well, we have to work together in order to be effective, right? Because we know that the – a lot of the hatreds, for instance, are deeply interconnected. And one thing that my colleagues and I all say individually, and we’re all right, is that our community is the canary in the coal mine. They may start by targeting LGBTQI+ persons. But they’re not going to end there. They may start by targeting Jewish people, but they’re not going to end there. And so one thing that Jessica Stern says so beautifully is we all either sink or rise together. So it’s critically important that we stand in solidarity.

The other reason why it’s so important for us to work together is because we know that people can be many things at once, right? And because of those multiple identities, people can be subject to multiple and compounding forms of discrimination. You know, I am a Black woman. That means I face racism and sexism. And so when I don’t take into account the most vulnerable and the most marginalized in communities of African descent, in indigenous communities, then I’m falling short.

And when my colleagues don’t take into account that Black LGBTQI+ persons, for instance, and other – you know, other members of marginalized, racial, ethnic, and indigenous communities within their communities are often the most vulnerable, then we fall short. So looking at the sort of least among us, right, the lowest common denominator will create policies that actually serve everyone.


Ms. Cormier: Exactly.

Ms. Ali: And a lot of this work, just like you said, Desirée, cannot be done without this internal collaboration. You and your team have done quite a bit in the past year, so I wanted to ask you a little bit more about some of your accomplishments. And first, what was your – you’d say, one of your greatest policy accomplishments?

Ms. Cormier: It is hard to narrow it down to just one, but I will focus on one that is sort of top of mind for me. And that is with Brazil. So I was really honored to join our ambassador to the U.N., Linda Thomas-Greenfield, to Brazil. And we visited Salvador, which is the sort of heart of Black Brazil. And it was the first time a Cabinet member had traveled to Salvador in 15 years. And we went there with Brazil’s minister of racial equality to announce the relaunch or the reinvigoration, if you will, of our U.S.-Brazil Joint Action Plan to Eliminate Racism and Promote Equality, JAPER.

And this was a huge moment because Brazil and the U.S. are so similar in so many ways – in so many ways. And it makes sense. Excuse me. Because of
our common histories with colonization and with the enslavement and the transatlantic slave trade of Africans and their descendants. So there are a lot of similarities and a lot of similar challenges as it pertains to indigenous rights, as it pertains to the systemic racism that has prevented people of African descent from living and reaching their full potential. And so we have a lot to learn from each other.

And so I really like to emphasize that the P in JAPER is "plan" but it also stands for partnership. It is a two-way street, right? We may have some lessons that we can share with Brazil on how we have tried to embed racial equity through the federal government policies -- for example, through Executive Order 13985. And I'm sure there are plenty of lessons that Brazil can share with us that we may be able to apply on how we can promote equity for our communities of color here in the United States.

Ms. Ali:

And this is exactly connected to what you were sharing, Desirée, in your opening remarks. That global challenges require global responses. I'm sure you have to deal with quite a bit of bureaucracy, navigate bureaucracy as well. So what would you say is one of your greatest bureaucratic accomplishments? (Laughter.)

Ms. Cormier:

OK. This may sound -- this may sound insignificant to those who have never engaged with the State Department, but for those of you who have had any experience at the State Department, you will know this is a big deal. We got a cable tag created. (Laughter.) That is huge. (laughs.) And so that means that we can now sort of document and categorize reporting from around the world that pertains to marginalized racial, ethnic, and indigenous groups. That’s huge, y'all, because it helps us keep track of the reporting but it also encourages more reporting, right?

So as a former reporting officer, again I started my career as an FSO, whenever I had a cable it was -- there was an incentive to add as many tags as possible so that as many folks would read it, right? And so if I’m a reporting officer, covering human rights in Vietnam, for example, and I’m talking about, I don’t know, a human rights issue -- name it, right? Freedom of association issue. And I’m reporting that, you know, 12 people happened to be arbitrarily detained because of their association with this group, it might -- it might now be an added incentive for me to say, well, wait a minute, what was their ethnicity of all those 12, right? Because then we pick up on patterns.

And in the scheme of things, 12 people may not sound like a huge deal, but if all 12 of them just happened to be from the same ethnic group, that might warrant a little bit more interrogation. You know, what is it about this ethnic group that maybe is causing the government to target them and their activities, right? And that, again, can be the canary in the coal mine because
oftentimes – and I’m not singling out Vietnam – but oftentimes when we look at around the world, authoritarian leaders and authoritarian wannabe leaders will find a group to scapegoat. And usually that group is already the most vulnerable, or already the most marginalized.

And the unfortunate reality is because of our history, people of African descent and indigenous peoples and Roma people are consistently the most marginalized, pushed to the margins of society. So oftentimes we see them being sort of considered easy targets. And when we don’t pick up on what’s going on in their communities, we could be missing a harbinger of things to come.

Ms. Ali:
Mmm hmm, yeah. Can you share any key accomplishments that your office has made because of the internal advocacy that you mentioned, the internal support within the State Department?

Ms. Cormier:
Yeah. I mean, most of the things we’ve accomplished would not have been possible if it weren’t for partners and supporters within the State Department. I think, you know, one of the things I can think about is all the great work that we’re doing multilaterally that would not be possible without my former colleagues in the Bureau of International Organization Affairs. And our wonderful colleagues at our mission to the U.N. in New York, our mission to the Human Rights Council in Geneva have been fantastic partners, and necessarily so, right?

Because a lot of these conversations are happening in these spaces with or without us, because these are global conversations. One thing I always point to as proof that this is not just an American challenge, it’s not just an American priority, is the work that UNESCO has done on antiracism. We have not been members of UNESCO for several years. I believe it was just announced that we are rejoining. Our rejoining of UNESCO was approved today. So, yay, we’re back in. (Laughter.)

But while we were outside of UNESCO, UNESCO has done incredible work on antiracism. They created this toolkit on how member states can promote antiracism in their policies. Again, not just because it’s the right thing to do, but in pursuit of a more robust democracy. In pursuit of more sustainable and inclusive economic growth. In pursuit of peace and stability, right? And so I point to that all the time as proof that this is not just an American concept, or something that we are trying to jam down other people’s throats.

Ms. Ali:
Desirée, something that I’m often worried about is the sustainability of the work. And you mentioned this in your opening remarks, that collective effort is important to ensure sustainable work. You’re trying to institutionalize change, which is difficult. What are some of the steps that you’ve taken in your team to ensure that this work is sustainable beyond your appointment?
Ms. Cormier: Yeah. I mean, that is my number-one priority, right? I don’t want this to be something that is just a couple year project. I envision this to be something that long outlasts my tenure, and hopefully my lifetime. And we are doing that – my team and I are doing that by helping our colleagues understand what this work is and why it’s important. And I am confident that once they get it, they will see how much more effective our programs are, our policies are. And that is good for them, right? It’s in our benefit to engage these communities, not to sort of go along with their marginalization or the inequities that exist.

I think, you know, the colleagues that I have met around the world when I travel, when we talk about it and when I explain to them what this work actually looks like, how they actually do it, it’s like a lightbulb goes off, right? And for many of them, when they join me for meetings and I get to meet with members of communities of African descent, or indigenous communities that have said: We’ve never met with anyone from the U.S. government, let alone had someone come in and want to hear from us, right, and listen to us. I think that was kind of a gut punch to some of my colleagues because it was almost like – you know, I would look at them, like, hey, you’ve been here for two years. (Laughs.) What’s the deal, right?

And inevitably they would hear something insightful from that meeting that would greatly contribute to what we’re trying to do, whether, again, it’d be on promoting food security, right, or combatting climate change, or building resilience to deal with the climate crisis. And so they see the value-add that this work brings to our priorities. And so my hope is that that will help sustain the work.

Ms. Ali: So you mentioned climate change, food security, this is all work that needs to intersect with what your office does. And you said, Desirée, explaining to colleagues what this work is, right? In a recent conversation you said that you will not accept that this work is controversial. How have you handled backlash, resistance, or even just a lack of understanding of this – what this work is, both inside and outside of the State Department?

Ms. Cormier: Yeah. Well, I try to handle it with grace. But that’s hard sometimes, when the arguments are not genuine, right? And so I’m always happy to engage in a policy debate, but if the premise of your disagreement is rooted in the denial of my humanity, as one great writer said, I can’t engage on that. I can’t engage on that. Now, I don’t know where that quote is from, but I believe I said it because it’s true. I just can’t accept that it’s controversial for me to say that every human being, by virtue of being a human being, should have the same dignity and rights as everyone else, regardless of their race or ethnicity. That is not controversial. And that is what this work is about.
It, again, is about trying to bridge that divide between the stated fact and the stated truth in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, that every single human being is born free and equal in dignity and rights, and then the reality—in the lived reality of far too many people of African descent, indigenous peoples, Roma people, and people of other marginalized racial and ethnic communities. That is not controversial. It shouldn’t be, in my mind.

Ms. Ali: Yeah. Some of the work that we’ve done at CSIS is making the case that diversity, equity and inclusion is a national security imperative. How have you made that case within State or outside, that this work contributes to our national security interests and policies, and that it should be a bipartisan issue?

Ms. Cormier: Yeah. You know, again, for me it’s a no-brainer. It’s obvious, right? When you have entire segments of your population of your country that are prevented from getting a quality education, and then thereby prevented from getting a good job, and then thereby prevented from actually contributing positively to your economy, and prevented from supporting themselves and their families, what does that lead to? That actually leads to great breeding ground, recruit—you know, sort of right recruitment for illicit actors, whether they be drug cartels, whether they are human traffickers, right?

And so it is—and it should be—in a country’s interest to ensure that everyone can productively contribute to their society. Whether that is economically or whether that is politically. Now, the economic argument tends to be the easier one, so that’s the one I focus on. And I was engaging with a Roma advocate and activist in Europe. And he brilliantly put it this way. You know, Europe’s generally—the demographic of Europe’s population is quite old. It’s aging fast. And it’s not growing very quickly. That is not true for the Roma population. The Roma population is young, and it is growing quickly.

So why wouldn’t you take advantage of this youthful population as an obvious sort of ready-made population that can not only contribute to your economy, but who can, you know, be a skilled workforce that can help sort of offset the impact of your aging populations? So he lays it out much more articulately than I just did, but the data is there. And that—the economic piece tends to be really compelling, as well as the security threat, right? When you don’t allow people to get a job—(laughs)—then they will turn to illicit activities to survive. That’s just human nature.

Ms. Ali: The data point is key moving forward on these issues. Desirée, we talked quite a bit about accomplishments, wins for your office. Now, looking ahead, what would you like to accomplish within the next year in your role?
Ms. Cormier: Oh. So much, right? There’s so much work to be done. This is the challenge of this work, because it’s urgent and it’s ever-present. Like, it’s everywhere. And so a lot of the work – the difficulty of my job is assessing where can we really lean in, and where do we have to say, OK, maybe not this year, but next year? So I would say, you know, in the next year I really hope to continue to hammer down the point that this is a global challenge.

So in the first year, I’ve challenged to five of the six regions that the State Department covers. I will be traveling – the one I haven’t gone to yet is South-Central Asia. But I will be going in a few months. And so once I hit that, then I will have been to every country in each of those regions. And that’s really important to underscore, again, the global nature. This is not just a problem of the Americas, right? this is not just an American problem. It really does affect every society in a myriad of ways.

And so I think, you know, if we’re able to underscore the global nature of this to our colleagues, but also equip them with the tools, with the language, with the knowledge to be able to comfortably do this work in a robust and meaningful way, without sort of relying on us – on my team, or me, to come and travel there and say, you know, this is how you do it, that would be a huge marker of success. And we’re trying to facilitate that sort of brain trust in the community of learning. We have stood up a community of practice that includes colleagues from not just Washington, but from our embassies and consulates around the world.

And this critically important because it allows them to talk to each other and to engage with each other. So, you know, we – and what we try to do is we try to spotlight an embassy or a consulate at every one of those meetings, where they can talk about the policy that they have been doing, or the program that they have enacted to try and support the human rights of communities of African descent, of indigenous communities, of Roma communities, of other communities. And that has been really helpful in getting people to understand what this looks like in a practical way.

Ms. Ali: Absolutely. We’ll be turning it over to audience Q&A here in a few minutes. Desirée, I want to ask you about how ideally would U.S. foreign policy change if your work, you know, keeps being implemented? I’ll share with you this quote from Senate Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Bob Menendez, who said regarding your appointment. He said, your appointment will play a critical role in streamlining U.S. efforts to secure human rights and fight inequality around the world. How would U.S. foreign policy ideally change because of the work that you are doing?

Ms. Cormier: Yeah, I mean, ideally the way we conduct foreign policy will change, in that there will be a universal recognition that for every crisis, for every topic, members of marginalized racial, ethnic, and indigenous communities are
differently and disproportionately impacted. And that is true across the board, whether we’re talking about food insecurity, democratic backsliding, COVID-19, economic inequality. And when we fail to acknowledge that, our policy responses, our programmatic responses, fall short.

And so, for me, it would be ideal if that just becomes second nature, in the way that I think my colleagues in the Office of Global Women’s Issues have finally managed to do. But I will also temper expectations. That took a long time, right? One of the things I always remind myself, when I get sort of antsy and impatient with the lack of – or, the pace of progress, is of an African proverb that used to be pasted on the Joburg airport when you disembarked your plane. And it was, you know, if you want to go fast, go alone. But if you want to go far, go together. And I want to go far. So we have to go together. And that means bringing everybody along.

Ms. Ali: Absolutely. I’d love to turn it over to audience questions. If you do have a question, if you can briefly introduce yourself and share a brief question as well. You are able to go to the mic over here if you all want to line up. We’ll be taking in-person questions, and my colleague Rafi will be sharing some online questions as well.

Please.

Ms. Cormier: It’s not on.

Q: Check, check, check? There we go.

Ms. Cormier: Perfect. There we go.

Q: Great, thanks. I’d like to hear a word of optimism from you. I know you have a very trying job. My name is Todd Wiggins. I appreciate what you do.

And I wanted to ask you, I know you have your challenges and your times when you maybe even want to cry yourself to sleep, but let’s ask you what you found most beneficial in your methodology? What gives you the competitive advantage to do the job that you do – besides that beautiful suit you’re wearing, by the way. (Laughter.) But beyond that, tell me about – a little bit about the language skills. You said that you’ve been to so many different countries and you want to round it out completely. And that gives you – you said that’s mandatory in order to be sufficient at what you do. But tell me a little bit about where you – that salient point in your life recently when you said: I know I can do this, and this is why. Here’s – put this on my resume.

Ms. Cormier: I don’t know if I have that moment, but I can tell you what gives me hope and why I keep doing this work. And it is the engagement with members of these
communities. And I was, frankly, nervous when I first traveled in this role. I didn’t know what reception I would get, right? I didn’t know if people would say, well, you’re a hypocrite because you guys are still struggling with racism. How could you do this role? It was actually quite the contrary. It was the exact opposite reception.

My first trip in this role was to Colombia. And it was too – I was part of the presidential delegation to the inauguration of President Petro and Vice President Márquez – Francia Márquez the first Black vice president of that country. And as part of that trip, as is standard for any time I travel, I engage with members of marginalized racial, ethnic, and indigenous communities. And I was engaging with members of the Afro-Colombian community. And they said: You finally see us. And I thought that was so touching, because, as they put it, when we didn't talk explicitly about race, we were kind of invisibilizing them.

And so it was really powerful, and a really strong affirmation at the beginning of this tenure that has kept me going, because in various iterations I've heard the same thing from community members wherever I go, particularly communities of African descent, and particularly indigenous communities that have never engaged with a U.S. government official, or someone who is, you know, a senior-level official from D.C. who traveled to that country to meet them, and prioritized meeting them over the foreign minister, right?

For me, it’s much more important to engage with communities and civil society than, frankly, it is about engaging with government representatives. Because my work is looking at our own policies. It’s looking at how we are engaging with these communities.

Q: Thanks. My name is Maria Madev. I’m an attorney and I work in the DEI space. I have a couple of questions for you. Thank you to CSIS for hosting this and, Desirée, for your time today.

My first question is about – you hinted at this, but when we talk about diversity and equity globally, how do we talk about, you know, the recent sort of clawing back of rights in this country, whether it’s the U.S. Supreme Court’s decision striking down affirmative action or anti-LGBTQ+ legislation in various states? So that’s the first question. The second question is about public-private partnership. Are you exploring, you know, opportunities to partner with companies to leverage the human and financial resources?

Ms. Cormier: Yes. Let me start with the second one, because that’s the easier one. Absolutely. We love a good PPP, right? And I spent several years in my career in the private sector, and so I know the power of the private sector, particularly because of the resources they can bring to bear. And so we have
engaged with foundations, but also private companies to see if we can find ways to collaborate on promoting, again, equality for underrepresented groups.

One example is – I can’t – I think it was Intel is a recent recipient of the secretary’s award for corporate excellence because of their work in Costa Rica. They have created an apprenticeship program specifically for Black Costa Ricans and indigenous Costa Ricans. And so I immediately reached out to them to, you know, not only commend them for the great work, but to see how we can – they could potentially expand it to other countries in the region. But then also take it a step further, right?

Like, it’s great to have these kinds of programs that address the immediate – or, sort of stop the pain and help a few dozen folks. But how can we leverage that into actually addressing the structural issues that cause those problems in the first place. That’s where I’m interested, right? That’s what I think the private sector in particular can be quite powerful and quite influential. So, yes, absolutely, PPPs.

The first question is so hard, but it really does underscore that we are not the only country – like, we are obviously grappling with problems in the United States. And that’s why I necessarily engage in this world and lead with a great deal of humility, right, because everyone can see what’s going on here in the United States. And when we have a sort of regression of rights for Black people, for people of color, for LGBTQI+ folks, it does make my job harder. But it reinforces my desire to do this work because we see – and my colleague, Special Envoy Jessica Stern, for LGBTQI+ rights talks about this so eloquently, because she has the same problem. (Laughs.)

But she noted, and I think it’s very true, that a lot of these anti-LGBTQI+ legislations are exported, right? They’ve gotten ideas from other countries, and they bring it here. And then we kind of export these bad things too. It’s the same for racism, particularly for violent White extremism, right? We saw the shooter in Buffalo cribbed his manifesto from a shooter in New Zealand. So, you know, these – the groups that sort of perpetuate hate and racism, they don’t know any borders. So those of us who are trying to promote a more equal and just world for all people should also know no borders. We also have to collaborate in order to make progress. But, yeah, it’s hard.

Operator: Thank you so much, Special Representative, for joining us today. I have some online questions. I’m going to combine two, because of course there’s a lot about the Supreme Court rulings.

One question from Genevieve: Will ethnic diversity and U.S. foreign policy be compromised due to this latest Supreme Court ruling against using race as an enrollment factor in colleges? And then another question from Lauren.
They say: I think yesterday’s Supreme Court decision against affirmative action makes sense only if you think we’re all starting at the same starting line. If you think that past discriminations don’t matter and that there’s no current discrimination, how do you get people to understand this isn’t true?

Ms. Cormier: Wow, that’s really great questions. You know, on the first question, I would just refer everyone to the president’s statement yesterday in response to the Supreme Court decision. It was a really strong and a really robust statement. And he said that obviously we’ll have to comply with the Supreme Court’s decision, but that does in no way impact or lessen our resolve to promote racial equity and justice – period. So on that, I would refer the person joining us to just watch the president’s statement, because I thought it was really powerful.

On the other question, about how to help folks understand that we’re not starting from the same point, it’s such a good question. And it gives me a good reason to explain why my title is racial equity and justice, not racial equality and justice. So equity is a means to equality. Equality is the goal, right? But we know that not everyone is starting at the same starting point, so we will require equity to get there. And I was in Poland and I was having dinner with a colleague, a local colleague, a Polish woman who works at the embassy. And she said, what does equity mean? Why does your title say equity?

And I tried to explain to her and she just kind of looked puzzled. And I said, let me talk you through a picture that became really popular in the U.S. following the murder of George Floyd.

Ms. Ali: I know exactly what you’re talking about.

Ms. Cormier: You know what I’m talking about? OK. So if you don’t know what I’m talking about, listen. If you do, I’m sorry for being redundant. So I said, picture three people behind a fence. One person is tall enough on his own to see over the fence. The middle person is not quite there yet, but maybe if he stands on his tippy toes he can see over the fence. And the third person is too short to see over the fence, even if he or she or they tried, like if they jumped or whatever.

And then, second picture – so that is the reality, right? Equality would be giving each one of those persons a stool of the same height. So that means the tall guy, who didn’t need a stool, now gets a stool and can see even more over the fence. That’s not necessary. He already saw over the fence. The middle guy now can see over the fence, because the stool was tall enough for him. But the short person still can’t see over the fence because the stool is not big enough to get him over the fence in terms of eyesight. That’s equality.
Equity is giving each of them the stool of the size they need to see over the fence at the same level. And so that means the tall guy does not get a stool, but nothing gets taken away from the tall guy. He can still see over the fence. We’re not digging a hole for him, right? (Laughter.) Nothing is getting taken away from him, OK? He can still see over the fence. He’s good. Middle guy gets the stool of the size he needs to now see over the fence, same as the tall guy. And then the short person gets a stool that is tall enough to now allow him to see over the fence and the same level as everyone else. That’s equity. Justice is removing the fence altogether. That is our goal. We don’t need a fence. We don’t need a fence.

Ms. Ali: And the fear often is that that tall guy is going to lose something as a result of this, right?

Ms. Cormier: Yeah, as if – like, yeah, the fear is that, oh no, you’re giving the short guy a big stool and then somehow the fence will get taller. No, the fence is not getting taller.

Ms. Ali: I would like to take all questions. I’m going to do my best. Desirée, do you mind if we take a few questions at a time, just for the sake of time?

Ms. Cormier: Sure.

Q: Yeah. Sorry, let me move this up a little bit. My name is Mahed Ochmi. I am the manager of a program dedicated to working with a bunch of different civil society organizations in the peace and security field to try and grapple with racism, White supremacy, and numerous other things.

My question is going to be around that second piece of that two-prong issue. So how does White supremacy factor into your approach as far as trying to grapple with racial equity? Its deleterious effects, its interconnected effects with prejudice, and racism, and discrimination, and the fact that it does affect all of us internationally, and has forever, basically? Connected to that, how do you grapple with the somewhat complicated history of the State Department around exporting imperialist ideals and racism and White supremacy itself, in your work?

Ms. Cormier: Yeah. So, you know, I think it is – oh, sorry, we’re supposed to take a few questions.

Ms. Ali: Mind if we take one more?

Ms. Cormier: Sure.

So my question is about institutions like mine, that you alluded to a little bit. Thinking about philanthropy does not like risk. It likes sure bets. And it often doesn’t take into account the innovation required for the work that you both do. So curious if you were thinking about an annual report or some sort of evaluation, maybe at the end of the first, second, or third year of your work, that you could collaborate on or that you should share with a sector like mine to consider funding opportunities to continue this work for the long term.

Ms. Cormier: Yeah. Thank you. OK, on the first question, you know, I think it is really remarkable that we now have a president and a secretary of state that have acknowledged that we haven’t always been on the right side of history. Now, that may be sort of, like, obvious for many of us, but you have people in those positions actually acknowledge that, hey, maybe our foreign policy wasn’t always positive, right, or didn’t actually contribute positively to the development of the democracy in this country, that’s huge. So that is a step in the right direction.

In terms of dealing with White supremacy, that is – as you said, it’s a global threat, right? So when we look at racially and ethnically motivated violent extremism, White supremacy is at the top of that. And so those who engage in violent White supremacy, again, they know no borders. They are talking to each other from across continents. And so our solutions have to also cross continents and national borders.

And so we are engaged with our colleagues in the counterterrorism bureau to ensure that our efforts to combat racially and ethnically motivated violent extremism don’t just focus on the perpetrators of the violence, but also the victims and the targets of that violence, right? And that is something that I think, again, would make our policies stronger, because those communities, as the most impacted, could have interesting solutions that we may not have thought about. So that’s what we’re trying to do.

On the question of whether or not we’re going to be doing an annual report, the short answer is no. And that is very much on purpose. If I came into this role and I said to my colleagues at the State Department, my already overburdened FSO colleagues at embassies and consulates around the world that have to do the Human Rights Report, the Trafficking in Persons Report, the International Freedom Report, I’m going to – hi, I’m new, and I’m going to add to you another annual report, they would have ran me off. They would have ran me off. (Laughter.)

So I thought, how can we be more strategic about this? Why don’t we ensure a lens – a racial and ethnic equity lens into the reports they already have to do? And that has actually really made these reports much more robust and
interesting and insightful. Because, again, you’re talking about trafficking in persons and you say, OK, there were only 100 people trafficked in this country from this reporting period, that doesn’t sound bad.

But if you say, wait, there have been 100 people, and of those 100, 99 of them have been Black women. Well, what are we doing with Black women, right? Like, are we actually engaging this community? Are we working with civil society that is led by Black women to talk about why this is such a problem and why they are being targeted? And then thereby, how do we come up with robust solutions?

If we don’t incorporate – because we lived in a racialized world, when we don’t acknowledge that race is a factor in many of these issues, again, we fall short. We can’t just ignore racism away. And so that is how we’ve been trying to incorporate this work. And so far, I’ve gotten great feedback from colleagues in civil society that, particularly in the Trafficking in Persons Report, they really did appreciate that new nuance.

Ms. Ali: That lens needs to be embedded in everything, not be separate. Unfortunately, my team has informed me that I can only take two questions. So whoever was next. Keep it one question, and then I’ll take one more person.

Q: Sure. Michael Chay Kim at the State Department.

Ms. Cormier: Hey, Michael.

Q: Hi! (Laughter.)

Ms. Cormier: Michael, you’ve been working with me. (Laughter.)

Q: I worked for the special representative a couple years ago. She’s brilliant. She’s great to work for, so big plug for her.

Ms. Cormier: Aw, thank you. Y’all hear that?

Q: My question – (laughter) –

Ms. Cormier: I’m just saying that to my team. (Laughs.)

Q: So how do you engage countries that are very homogenous, like Japan, or Egypt, or Finland? I thought that was quite insightful, what you said about your engagement with the Polish locally employed staff. Thank you.

Ms. Cormier: Mmm hmm.
Ms. Ali: I'll take one more. Whoever is next.

Ms. Cormier: Should we just – they can ask quickly and then I'll try to give quick answers.

Ms. Ali: Very speedy so you don’t get me in trouble. (Laughter.)

Q: My name is Maxwell Lawson. I’m a 2023 USAID Payne Fellow. So it’s great to see another fellow –

Ms. Cormier: Oh, congratulations – yeah – in a leadership position.

Q: And my question was a little related of if you’ve experienced pushback from countries that are more homogenous or aren’t willing to incorporate marginalized communities into the government? Thank you.

Ms. Cormier: Should we just have them –


Ms. Cormier: Super quick.

Q: I’ll make it quick as possible. First, I apologize. Last year BPIA at the park. I came to see you and celebrate your new position, but I didn’t see you there. Too many people.

Ms. Cormier: (Laughs.) Sorry.

Q: No, it’s my fault, not your fault. Two questions about looking inwards in terms of marginalized communities. We have a lot of problems with retaining foreign service and civil service persons at State. And recently, Ambassador Gina Abercrombie-Winstanley just actually resigned. I just wanted to have your feedback on that, if you can speak about marginalized communities and the problems retaining people at the State Department. Thank you.

Ms. Ali: Thank you.

Ms. Cormier: Thank you.

Ms. Ali: We won’t leave you the last one, so super quick.

Q: OK. My name's Jana. I'm a graduate student at NYU. First of all, thank you for coming here. It’s such a pleasure to hear your talk.
My question was more so, when you spoke about Brazil I’d wondered if you’d seen any policies while there that you felt could fast-track our country to a more equitable society.

Ms. Cormier: OK. Let me start with the question about our chief diversity and inclusion officer. I want to make a factual correction. She did not resign. She retired. So she has had a long career in the foreign service, and so she retired after 30 – maybe 40 – 30 years. And so I don’t want to give the impression that she sort of quit. The work that the Chief Diversity Inclusion Office and officer is doing obviously supports and complements the work that I’m trying to do. But it is distinct, right?

So they are looking internally at how to make the State Department and our workforce look like the question that we are representing. Super important. Also super important to remind y’all that that includes racial diversity, but is broader than just racial diversity. So it’s also about gender diversity, it’s about diversity for LGBTQI+ folks, persons with disabilities, women, you know, everyone, run the gamut. To look like the beautiful diversity of our country.

On the question of how I engage countries where there is no racism, that’s just not true, right? That’s just not true. I’ve met recently with a person of African descent from one of these – I can’t remember – one of the Slavic countries that is usually assumed to be quite homogeneous. And she said, no one ever sees us because – and they’ll say that racism is not a problem, but that’s because they never ask me. And so there are Black people everywhere.

Ms. Ali: Who are we listening to?

Ms. Cormier: Right? There are indigenous peoples everywhere, right? There are members of marginalized racial, ethnic, and indigenous communities everywhere. It’s just who do we see and who do we talk to? And so I push back on the notion that there are homogenous countries, because I have yet to meet people who live in those countries who have said, yeah, there’s no racism here. There’s no problems here, right? And so it’s just a matter of whether or not countries are willing to confront it in an open and honest manner.

The other important thing I would note about that question in particular is that, again, our priority is not necessarily engaging with governments. It’s great when I can. It’s really awesome when I can. But when I can’t, that’s OK because, again, this work is about looking at U.S. policies, looking at how we are engaging in the country, and how we are supporting the human rights of these communities. So it’s more important that I’m engaging with these communities themselves and the civil society groups that are supporting their work and their efforts towards equality, than with government ministries. That’s not to say that I don’t care about government engagement.
It’s just saying for my work, it really is important to actually engage with these communities.

And then the other question was about –

Ms. Ali: A question about retention.

Ms. Cormier: Retention. Again, that’s the work for the Chief Diversity and Inclusion Office, so.

Ms. Ali: We had a question about – the last question about Brazil and if you’d seen anything –

Ms. Cormier: Ah, Brazil. You know, Brazil, again, similar to the U.S., they just elected a new president that has put racial equality as a priority. And it’s still very young. You know, as I was talking to the minister for racial equality a few months ago, she reminded me it’s only been six months. (Laughs.) So, you know, I’m sure that there will be policies that have proven effective in terms of promoting more equality. But right now, they’re very much in the nascent stage, and they are very much trying to rebuild from the devastation under the last administration in terms of opportunities for people of African descent, but also the real stigmatization and marginalization of indigenous peoples across Brazil.

And so they do not have an easy task ahead of them, but with ministers like Minister Franco, the brand-new Minister for Indigenous Peoples Sônia Guajajara, and the commitment of the president, I’m hopeful that they can make progress. But the challenge is this work is urgent and it is also personal, right? We’re not talking about statistics. We’re not talking about theories. We’re talking about people’s lives. And many of these people are so desperate for change that they kind of put all of their hopes into a vote for a new administration. And I think it’s true here too, right? The expectations are quite high for some sort of relief immediately. And that’s hard to deliver. That’s really hard to deliver.

Ms. Ali: Absolutely. Desirée, thank you so much for your time.

Ms. Cormier: Thank you. (Applause.)

Ms. Ali: Thank you for your leadership. Thank you to your work and the work of your team. I wish you all the best for the year to come. And hopefully we have the chance to host you here again, and your team, next year to hear more about your wonderful accomplishments.

Before we transition to the reception, I’d like to thank a few people. Without them, this event today would not be possible. I’d like to thank you all, of
course, for joining us here in person and online. I’d like to thank Claire on the special representative’s team. (Applause.) Did a phenomenal job to make this event happen. Darius, Jessica, and anyone else that I’ve missed from your office, thank you to all of you.

I’d like to express my immense gratitude to my team, Naz and Rafi. This event would not be possible without them. (Applause.) There’s also quite a few interns that helped today make the event happen. Leia, Fredrico, Nani. Thank you to all of you for making today happen as well. I’d also love to thank our streaming and broadcasting team who do a phenomenal job in making these events accessible to the audience online. Dwayne, Chi, Craig, Phil. Thank you to all of you.

And lastly, thank you to our conferencing team at CSIS, who put a wonderful reception right outside. So I would love to welcome all of you right outside this room in the atrium for some wonderful drinks and food. And hopefully you all can spend some time networking. Thank you all again for joining us here. And, Desirée, it was a pleasure to host you.

Ms. Cormier: Thank you for having me. (Applause.)

(END)