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TRANSCRIPT

Smart Women, Smart Power
"Uncovering the Uyghur Genocide"

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FEATURING

Ambassador Kelley Currie

Former Deputy U.S. Representative to the United Nations and Ambassador-at-Large for Global Women's Issues

CSIS EXPERTS

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Kathleen McInnis: This is Smart Women, Smart Power, a podcast that features conversations with some of the world's most powerful women.

Amb. Kelley Currie: You could see the way the Chinese were reacting to that. They were in denial mode about it, in denial mode about it. And then when the proof came through, they then switched to their narrative about, "Oh, we're just doing vocational training for these people and we're just, it's just a poverty alleviation program." I'm like, yeah, I've seen how you do poverty alleviation in Tibet. It's not voluntary. They're being arbitrarily detained.

Kathleen McInnis: We feature thought leaders at all career levels where we explore, among other things, the many contributions that women make to the fields of international business, national security, foreign policy, and international development. Does having women in positions of power influence the outcomes of decisions in these fields? Why or why not? Join me, Dr. Kathleen McInnis, director of the Smart Women's Smart Power Initiative at the Center for Strategic and International Studies for these incredible conversations. The CSIS Smart Women, Smart Power podcast is supported by BAE Systems.

Please note this episode contains subject matter relating to human atrocities, including but not limited to, comments on genocide, torture, and forced sterilization. Listener discretion is advised.

I am so pleased to welcome Ambassador Kelley Currie to the Smart Women, Smart Power podcast today. Ambassador Currie formerly served as the U.S. Ambassador at Large for Global Women's Issues and the U.S. Representative at the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women. Prior to this, she led the Department of State's Office of Global Criminal Justice and served under Ambassador Nikki Haley as the United States Representative to the United Nation's Economic and Social Council, and alternative representative to the UN General Assembly. Throughout her career in foreign policy, Ambassador Currie has specialized in human rights, political reform, development, and humanitarian issues with a particular focus on the Asia-Pacific region. Thank you so much for joining us today from the Great White North in Halifax.

Amb. Kelley Currie: It's my pleasure to be here, Kathleen, and it's been great to be up here in Halifax and soaking up all the energy of this conference these past couple days.

Kathleen McInnis: Absolutely. So, Ambassador Currie, you've had an extraordinary career full of dynamic roles and an incredibly important portfolios. What brought you into this world of human rights law and international affairs?

Amb. Kelley Currie: Well, I sort of fell into it by accident. It wasn't really an intentional choice. I came up to Washington, but I was interested in politics with my freshly minted political science degree from the University of Georgia.

Kathleen McInnis: Mm-hmm. <affirmative>

Amb. Kelley Currie: And didn't really know anything about it. I had focused mostly on domestic politics, hadn't really looked at international issues. When I was in college, I was very moved, and it was during a time where there were a lot of things going on that were about human rights in Tiananmen Square.

Kathleen McInnis: Mm-hmm. <affirmative>

Amb. Kelley Currie: And the 88 generation movement in Burma, the fall of the Berlin Wall, and people's demand for freedom and human rights. But I didn't really realize that that was like a career choice <laugh> I could do to like work with people who were doing those things until I got to Washington and I was interning in the office of Congressman John Porter, who passed away recently and was my first mentor here, and he was the co-founder of the Congressional Human Rights Caucus.

And I was interning in his office and the Human Rights Caucus staff directors kind of took me under their wing and I immediately kind of fell in love with this work and the people that they worked with and the challenges of working on human rights.

Kathleen McInnis: Mm-hmm. <affirmative>

Amb. Kelley Currie: And decided when I went back to school finished, I actually was still in school, finished, got my degree, came back to Washington wanting to work in this field. I had always wanted to go to law school. I thought, you know, I need to be a lawyer for some reason. I don't know why I thought that <laugh>. And so, I went to law school at night while I was working on the hill for Congressman Porter, and I ended up running the Human Rights Caucus. <Wow> Yes, <laugh>, I did that for four years and it was the most amazing job.

I got to meet the bravest, most incredible people. I remember this was in the mid-nineties, you know, learning about the Taliban at that time

when people weren't paying any attention unless you were in Afghanistan focus and we covered the world.

Kathleen McInnis: Yeah.

Amb. Kelley Currie: So, I learned about, you know, contexts all over the world and what people were doing to fight for freedom and fight for human rights and developed this just passion for wanting to help them. And so, I was doing it on the Hill through legislation, but I wanted to do more and be more intimately involved with it. And that led me to work with the International Republican Institute where I was able to go and work directly on the ground with civil society, with Democrats at risk, with activists who were fighting for democracy and human rights in their countries. And I was in Southeast Asia doing this.

I was working in Indonesia in Timor-Leste, I was there during, you know, for the referendum and the aftermath of that, the UN, the handover period, setting up our programs, running them, and working on Burma, on the Thai-Burma border, working with these incredible people. And it was actually in that context where I first started noticing how women's political participation, even in these movements where freedom and democracy was still like you had these movements for human rights, but they were largely dominated by men. The political space was largely taken up by men.

Kathleen McInnis: Yeah.

Amb. Kelley Currie: And women often struggle to have their voices and their issues brought to the floor and to participate on an equal basis even in movements that were led by women. This was true really. I noticed this with Burma, for instance, Aung San Suu Kyi, was the iconic leader of the Burmese democracy movement.

But when you like got down to the grassroots level, all of the people that were working on things seemed to be men. And they seemed to be taking up all the political space. I was meeting these women who were incredible. They were running schools in refugee camps. They were organizing migrant workers in Thailand.

Kathleen McInnis: Mm-hmm. <affirmative>

Amb. Kelley Currie: Burmese migrant workers who were being abused by their employers. They were doing all these incredible political things, but they weren't part of the formal political opposition. But they were getting more organized, especially the ethnic women, which is kind of you know,

when you think about it, it seems to be they're the most marginalized, you know, they're ethnic minorities. They fled conflict.

Kathleen McInnis: Yeah.

Amb. Kelley Currie: They are extremely vulnerable. But they were so organized in everything they did. The men were not.

Kathleen McInnis: Yeah.

Amb. Kelley Currie: I will tell you <laugh> and, but the women just like, I just felt like we needed to do more to support them.

So, I started a woman in politics kind of aspect to our Burma program that had not existed before. These like grassroots women's organizations who had been focused on service delivery, and then working with their communities and be like, "Look, you need to be participating in these conversations about constitution. When you have a women's auxiliary to a political party, you need to not be serving tea, and making snacks. You need to be in the room talking about the political things."

And so, it was great. I just basically stood there and provided funding and a place for them to meet and then they took off. But they were already working on things like women, peace, and security. They were part of the global coalition that actually led to the push for the Women, Peace, and Security initiative at the Security Council. They were already doing all these things. I just helped get them some additional funding, helped integrate them more into some of the political spaces and fought with my male counterpart, or you know, with our grantees and so to like fight for space for them to help them.

Kathleen McInnis: When you think about these issues moving forward and where the agenda needs to go, what do you think needs to be the priorities?

Amb. Kelley Currie: I think the Women, Peace, and Security agenda is really important. A lot of times you have the Women, Peace, and Security folks, they talk to civil society, and they talk among themselves, but they're not talking to the security forces.

Kathleen McInnis: Right.

Amb. Kelley Currie: And they're not really pushing on the militaries. We have a huge opportunity with Women, Peace, and Security. And I think when I think about we're in a global competition with authoritarian regimes, they are terrible. And Women, Peace, and Security, they don't even show up

at the playing field. But our partners in the Global South, their security forces are just completely around the bend, corrupt dictatorships. And the ones that are struggling where we really actually need to be having points of influence and trying to find ways to work with them - Women, Peace, and Security is a great entry point for working with security partners. We don't take enough advantage of it, I think.

Kathleen McInnis: Yeah.

Amb. Kelley Currie: And so, I really, one of the things that I've been doing, like I'm working with private security contractors on Women, Peace, and Security for instance.

Kathleen McInnis: Fantastic.

Amb. Kelley Currie: And making sure that they are thinking from the contract stage to implementation about where does Women, Peace, and Security fit into their work? Because, you know, we've privatized huge chunks of what we do in the field, but one of the funny things that I see is that DoD, the combatant commands love Women, Peace, and Security because they recognize this, they see it as this entry point and they see that we have the field to ourselves. We have so much to offer. It's also helpful for us in terms of the health of our own security services, of our own military. They see the benefits of a diverse force that reflects our society and that takes advantage of all the strengths and skills that having whole of society approach to security brings.

Kathleen McInnis: Yeah.

Amb. Kelley Currie: And they know that it makes our military stronger to have women participate in it. And so, they're eager to share that gospel with their security partners. But at the leadership level at DoD you often find that it's not-

Kathleen McInnis: It's an add-on.

Amb. Kelley Currie: They see it as a box ticking exercise. They see it as something they have to do. That we've got this Women, Peace, and Security act, I guess we have to do an implementation plan.

Kathleen McInnis: Right. It seems like as an action officer task -- a task list rather than like a strategic approach to be integrated into the planning systems.

Amb. Kelley Currie: And rather than seeing it as our like secret weapon and seeing it as a real opportunity for engagement where we literally have the field to ourselves and our adversaries don't even show up.

Kathleen McInnis: Yeah.

Amb. Kelley Currie: Like they just don't even show up.

Kathleen McInnis: Yeah.

Amb. Kelley Currie: They're hostile to it. In fact they think it's stupid and terrible. And we're like, okay, keep thinking that.

Kathleen McInnis: Right.

Amb. Kelley Currie: Keep overlooking this incredible opportunity.

Kathleen McInnis: Right.

Amb. Kelley Currie: And leave it to us to where we just can keep working with these security forces.

Kathleen McInnis: Keep focusing Russia on the hyper-masculine, like cartoonish-

Amb. Kelley Currie: Please, please keep focused that way.

Kathleen McInnis: Mm-hmm. <affirmative>.

Amb. Kelley Currie: And I think that it's stealth in a way despite all the talk about it, but especially on the security side. And when you talk to the women who are here for the Peace with Women engagement at Halifax, you get that strong sense that they're the secret weapon in our military. It's not our fancy tech, it's our soft skills. It's all of these things that people overlook.

Kathleen McInnis: Mm-hmm. <affirmative>.

Amb. Kelley Currie: And so I think that trying to get that message across to some of my less enlightened colleagues, <laugh> in the United States, <laugh> as well as you know, and then starting to operationalize it more. I think that we've also got to stop seeing women as victims and instead see them as

survivors. Which a survivor is a strong person, a survivor is a tough person. This is a totally different frame.

Kathleen McInnis: Hundred percent.

Amb. Kelley Currie: Once you start thinking about the problems that we look at through those lenses, you can't go back to at them through the old lenses.

Kathleen McInnis: Right.

Amb. Kelley Currie: And it opens up all kinds of new possibilities as well.

Kathleen McInnis: You are saying so many things that resonate so deeply with me in terms of where my analysis has also led. So--

Amb. Kelley Currie: <laugh> I mean, look, I lead with facts. I, it's like the facts don't care about your feelings. Right. And I think we also-

Kathleen McInnis: Exactly. Right. And, but here we are like-

Amb. Kelley Currie: And, this often gets like put as some kind of emotional, feel-good thing. I'm like, no, this is just realism.

Kathleen McInnis: Right.

Amb. Kelley Currie: I mean it actually is the way the world works.

Kathleen McInnis: Right.

Amb. Kelley Currie: And people like to think that the world is some, I mean, yes the world can be brutish and awful, but the idea that you're going to solve the problems created by men with guns, by applying more men with guns to the problem is just insane.

Kathleen McInnis: Yeah.

Amb. Kelley Currie: Like, have we not learned anything <laugh>? I'm really constantly amazed by it. And so I saw it at the UN where the same group of white male negotiators was sent to do peace negotiations and women were kept out of the rooms and that mattered. And then, "Oh yes, we have to do some Women, Peace, and Security activity." You're like, "No, Women, Peace, and Security is not an activity. It's not fairy dust."

Kathleen McInnis: Exactly.

Amb. Kelley Currie: You don't sprinkle it on something <laugh>. It's got to be like integrated from the beginning. And you've got to look at women as integral parts of solving the problem. Not as, we got to have a box checking exercise. You saw this with Afghanistan.

Kathleen McInnis: Right.

Amb. Kelley Currie: I mean I watched it happen every day when I was in the administration and it drove me crazy.

Kathleen McInnis: Yeah.

Amb. Kelley Currie: I would just constantly be fighting. I'm like, "Where are the women? We need to listen to the women. They are telling us things. You need to listen to them. Why aren't you listening to them? They have knowledge, they have information. They are the front lines of this. They are on the cold phase, please." And it deeply frustrated me.

Kathleen McInnis: Sure.

Amb. Kelley Currie: Deeply frustrating. And it continues to frustrate me that during the withdrawal, I would look and see who the decisionmakers were at the end of the day on Afghanistan, and it was all men. And I'm like, "Well that explains a lot about what happened." I'm sorry. But it does.

Kathleen McInnis: So another international crisis that I at least don't feel gets nearly enough attention, the Uyghur genocide.

Amb. Kelley Currie: Yeah.

Kathleen McInnis: Right now, I guess to start us off, when you started working on that issue, where was the U.S. government? What was going on at the time?

Amb. Kelley Currie: When I first started working on Uyghur issues, there wasn't really the U.S. government policy. They were going to put the East Turkestan independence movement on the terror list and then go live to regret it. So because I worked with the Tibetans, I knew, and you know, the way that I came into China again is through these kind of strange vectors. It's, you know, noticing that they were a problem in all the other problems. <laugh>.

Kathleen McInnis: Yeah.

Amb. Kelley Currie: They were nested within every other problem I was dealing with in Southeast Asia, for instance. And also, you know, working with the Tibetans, but also working on China human rights directly too with East Turkestan, with the Uyghurs. They were kind of adjacent to my work on Tibet. And so I knew about them before I think most people. And then when I was working for the International Committee of the Red Cross, and was interviewing them down at Gitmo, and trying to understand what had led them to show up in Afghanistan in the first place, which then pointed me toward what was happening on the ground under Chinese rule in Xinjiang.

Kathleen McInnis: Mm-hmm. <affirmative>.

Amb. Kelley Currie: And so it was something that I was tracking lightly as the human rights person. But in 2016, a young woman approached me to tell me that her brother had disappeared after he had returned back to China after he had done a program at the State Department, a visitors program. And she didn't understand it because her family, she's like, "We're model Uyghurs".

Kathleen McInnis: Yeah.

Amb. Kelley Currie: "My father works for the government. I'm here studying in the United States. My brother was, you know, just running a Uyghur language website to try to promote understanding between Uyghur people and Han Chinese. I don't understand why he's disappeared, and we think he's gone into this detention and he's been arrested. We don't know why." And they were so confused by it because they literally tried to follow the rules.

Kathleen McInnis: Yeah.

Amb. Kelley Currie: The Chinese Communist Party had set up and then we just kept hearing--

I was not in government at the time-- and we just kept hearing more and more of these stories and people seeking me out. And then I'm referring them to the human rights office at the State Department. I'm like, you need to go tell them. You need to tell them. And Rebiya Kadeer, who is a longtime friend of mine and a very prominent Uyghur woman, you know, is telling me that every Uyghur is losing people and they're like, just disappearing. So the State Department started tracking it. I went into government in 2017 at a time where it was already becoming clear that something was going on.

Kathleen McInnis: Right.

Amb. Kelley Currie: We did not really understand the scope and scale of it.

Kathleen McInnis: Right.

Amb. Kelley Currie: For a couple of years, I will say, to see like how many people it was, but it really just came from Americans, Australians, Germans, Brits of Uyghur descent, going to their government and being like, "I have not been able to reach these members of my family for six months. Like, and I was in contact with them every day. Now their WhatsApp is shut down. Their neighbors don't know what happened to them. They won't talk about it."

And so then all the people who are doing human rights reporting on it started really starting to produce and started to understand there was some really ground-breaking research done by some researchers who were looking at what was happening and started to really sketch out the scope of it. And by the end of 2017, we started to understand that there was something qualitatively different.

Kathleen McInnis: Did you have a moment? What was that moment where you realized that, "Oh my God. The scale of this?"

Amb. Kelley Currie: When we were sitting in a meeting with some of our like-minded countries and the Australians mentioned that they had an inordinately large number when they mentioned that they were having the same problem where I didn't realize that they had such a large Uyghur Australian community. First of all, that was an eyeopener for me.

And then they said that they've just had tens of thousands of people calling the foreign officers, asking if they can help them locate their relatives. And they were doing like this normal thing that those governments do, where they go to the Chinese government and say, "Our citizen is looking for this family member." And they were getting back from the Chinese government responses, "That person does not wish to speak to their relative in your country. And you need to tell them not to contact them anymore." And then the Australians were like, "What is this noise?"

Kathleen McInnis: Yeah.

Amb. Kelley Currie: We were sharing this information with our allies when the Australians told us that, I was just like, "This is beyond." I skipped over something, which is that the person who was put in charge of Xinjiang when this started happening was previously in charge of Tibet.

So I knew his work <laugh>, I knew his style, I knew what he had done in Tibet, very intimately. And saw that they were really rolling out the same kinds of policies. You could see the policy dictates coming out and what was going on. And then the other thing, I mean, there was also a massive step up in harassment of Uyghurs outside of China.

The forcing Uyghur students in-- there was a big incident where hundreds Uyghur students who were in Egypt were forced to go back to China. And the Egyptian government like canceled all their visas and sent them all back and they disappeared. I mean, they just disappeared into the internment system. And, like I said, these researchers started to kind of tried to figure out what was going on. Like looking at Chinese language websites, doing what the amazing China research community does of looking at source documents to understand and started seeing these patterns of procurement on websites where the Kashgar government has put 10,000 new police and corrections officers.

Like, you know, these extraordinary numbers and just things like that. And then they started looking at satellite imagery. And slowly but surely also, some of our great media outlets like Radio Free Asia and Voice of America who have Uyghur services, were able to start to get the pieces and get more information. And there were document leaks. Those were critical. The leaks of documents, that really was, again, it's like the aperture just kept opening. And every time we would get more information, it would add another piece to where we would start to see the shape and the scope of the whole thing. But I think that we were looking at it, and because we were looking at the problem from one perspective, we didn't see the whole infrastructure of it until much later that they had put in place.

And so it actually took a while to kind of piece it all together. But I would say that by mid-2018, or early 2018, actually by the end of 2017, we had a fairly good picture. But throughout 2018 it started to come into focus a lot more. And that's when we were starting to raise the issue in the UN too. I was still in New York.

Kathleen McInnis: Yeah.

Amb. Kelley Currie: And I was going to Geneva because we were down an ambassador or two in Geneva. So I was also doing a lot of work in Geneva to try to raise the issue. You could see the way the Chinese were reacting too, that they were in denial mode about it, in denial mode about it. And then when the proof came through, they then switched to their narrative about, "Oh, we're just doing vocational training for these people and we're just, it's just a poverty alleviation program."

I'm like, yeah, I've seen how you do poverty alleviation in Tibet. It's not voluntary. They're being arbitrarily detained. And so it's been a long process. It was a slow build in a way. But by the time we got to the genocide determination in January 2021, it had been, you know, four years of trying to understand the scope and scale and I would say that moment with the Australians was one.

And then another one was when there was a video of a train station in Xinjiang where they were offloading detainees. It was this train that just, like, went off into the horizon and it showed the platform. They were still at the front of the train offloading people. And there were thousands of people. They were blindfolded, they were shackled, they were wearing color coded uniforms. There were police and dogs. Like you could see all of this, you know, it's out in the public.

I mean, and it was terrifying. And it was like one day of moving people and then they're putting them on buses and sending them off to detention facilities. I mean there were all these things. It was a slow build that kind of inexorable. And then I would say we had a lot of arguments inside the administration about what to do and what to call it. Because when I was in the office of Global Criminal Justice, I said, "We need to start an atrocity file."

Kathleen McInnis: Mm-hmm. <affirmative>

Amb. Kelley Currie: Because it wasn't being thought of in an atrocity framework either. It was a human rights problem, it was, you know,

Kathleen McInnis: Right.

Amb. Kelley Currie: It was a China authoritarianism problem. And it had been in the Bureau of Human Rights up to them that it hadn't really been put in the atrocity framework.

Kathleen McInnis: Right.

Amb. Kelley Currie: And with policy tools, you know, it matters what tools we use and how we approach this.

Kathleen McInnis: Right.

Amb. Kelley Currie: And so when I was in that office in 2019, I said, "We need to open a file."

Kathleen McInnis: Yeah.

Amb. Kelley Currie: At which started the atrocity determination process in 2019. It was like the first thing I did when I showed in the office, I'm like, "You have a file on Xinjiang?" "Oh, we're tracking it lightly." I'm like, "Nope, we're opening a file." So that started the process of building the case. But what I think the tipping point for me, because I was like, "There are crimes against humanity here. I'm a lawyer, I'm looking at it, I'm looking at all the elements, blah, blah, blah." It's systematic, it's widespread. The nature of the abuses, the arbitrary detention, the torture, all of these things, crimes against humanity.

Sure. This is a slam dunk for crimes against humanity being committed here. I couldn't get to genocide mentally until we started getting the reports about the forced sterilization.

And so, again, this is where <laugh>, the women come in. Mostly it was men being detained. Right. Women were not being detained. They were being left at home. The women who were detained, it was more specific. Like they had a specific connection, but men were just being rounded up and put into a camp. So it was just --

Kathleen McInnis: Yeah.

Amb. Kelley Currie: you know, millions. But it was definitely mostly men. But what we were seeing with women and with families was different. There was a forcible sterilization in the camps for the women who were detained. And you know, we had reports, we were getting survivor testimony of women who had managed to get out, women who had been working as teachers in the camps who were able to get out because they were Kazakhstan citizens or whatever. And to talk about, get firsthand testimony about what was going on. And so we were starting to get more and more women.

And I think that, again, this is where China's blind spot toward women initially worked in our favor because they let women leave the country. And I think they didn't realize how powerful it would be to have these women's voices talking about what they had seen and what had happened to them. And so if you look at the survivor testimonies have largely come from women. And they are incredibly brave and powerful women who have come forward with these testimonies and talked about the situation. But it was the documentation of the forced sterilization and again, using procurement documents, using policy documents that talked about what they were doing.

Kathleen McInnis: Yeah.

Amb. Kelley Currie: And that they were basically applying the old one child approach, which China had perfected over decades. And which I think we all knew very well from its application to the Han Chinese population. At the same time they were getting rid of it in the Han Chinese population.

They were turning around and applying that whole course of apparatus to the Uyghur population in a way that had, was completely different from what had happened before, where they had been allowed as minorities to have more children. So there was the forced sterilization, which is a predicate act for genocide. And then the family separation, they were taking children out of homes and forcing them into boarding schools, children as young as two, taking them from their families. And this was true, even if only one member of the family was in detention, they would still take the child and put them in a boarding school. And it wasn't because there wasn't someone at home to take care of the child. It was literally to separate them from their family, and cut the cultural cord. And they talked about this in their policy documents that were leaked about cutting the cultural transmission cord. And I had seen this language in Tibet, too.

Kathleen McInnis: Yeah.

Amb. Kelley Currie: I would say that the evidence of widespread mass forced sterilization and the use of that coercive state apparatus for no population controlled reason. I mean, the Uyghurs are like a tiny minority. They're 1.4 billion people in China. They recognize they had a demographic time bomb in China. So they've been trying to incentivize urban Han Chinese to have more children. And they can't get them to do it. They're literally paying Han Chinese to have children at the same time they're forcibly sterilizing Uyghur women.

Kathleen McInnis: Yeah.

Amb. Kelley Currie: And so there's no legitimate policy reason for doing this other than to try to reduce and eliminate and shrink the size of the population of this group that is a predicate act for genocide. It's both the intent and then the action.

Kathleen McInnis: Mm-hmm. <affirmative>.

Amb. Kelley Currie: And so that was what convinced me. That's what allowed me because I was very, very conservative. People wanted to go for genocide determination. And you know the Uyghurs were also calling it a genocide. I think the word genocide is thrown around way too liberally. I'm not someone who uses it lightly. But I also get really frustrated with

our State Department because they tend to only declare things as a genocide after the mass killing has it's already happened.

Kathleen McInnis: Yeah.

Amb. Kelley Currie: Instead of understanding that the need for atrocity frameworks is actually to, we have a prevention obligation too under the Genocide Convention and calling something by its name when it's happening is far more important than doing it after the fact.

But I also am very, you know, I'm a lawyer, I wanna make sure I've got my facts before I use these powerful words. And so that was when I knew, was when we got the information about the family planning. So when you asked me about how this relates to women's issues, it's that I mean.

Kathleen McInnis: Yeah.

Amb. Kelley Currie: It's that. And I think that that was the turning point. It also allowed me as the Ambassador-at-Large for Global Women's Issues. I wasn't, you know, in charge of atrocity determinations anymore.

Kathleen McInnis: Yeah.

Amb. Kelley Currie: But it allowed me to go to the secretary and say, it's time.

Kathleen McInnis: And what was the reception?

Amb. Kelley Currie: He wanted to start using stronger language, but was being held back by the lawyers of the State Department. There's a process, we have to go through it. We have to have the evidence and the determination and State Department is very process oriented.

But also there were concerns while the Phase One trade negotiations were going on saying that China was committing a genocide, probably would not have made those go any easier. And the State Department is not the only actor in foreign policy, the Treasury Department, you know, we were pushing them to do different things with Global Magnitsky sanctions and other things. But it was a tough push with Treasury because after the Phase One trade deal was done, and after Covid hit, it did open up some policy space, I'm not going to lie, for us to be more aggressive on these things and we took full advantage of it, I would say.

And that's the art of policymaking. Is that you want to be able to do things and you know it's the right thing to do and you know, it needs to be done, but the policy space just isn't there.

Kathleen McInnis: Right.

Amb. Kelley Currie: And being ready, so that when that policy space opens up and you can rush into it. And that's kind of basically what happened, I would say in 2020.

Kathleen McInnis: To what extent do you feel like your being a woman affected this decision and the genocide determination and how that played out? If not, why not?

Amb. Kelley Currie: Well, I think I am underestimated a lot. <laugh>.

Kathleen McInnis: Yeah.

Amb. Kelley Currie: Yeah. I'll say that. I think I'm underestimated because I'm a woman and also because I'm in the Office of Global Women's Issues. Like people are like, "What are you doing? Like in the Women's Office you're having tea parties or something?"

Like, and even at the State Department, it's like you can't see her rolling her eyes <laugh> that we both are. And so I think that people are like, "Why are you in this meeting about, you know, security issues and about Syria?" I'm like, "I'm sorry, are there 80,000 women and children in Al-Hawl camp?

"Yeah, I'm here because of that." And I don't even need that reason.

Kathleen McInnis: Right.

Amb. Kelley Currie: But are you joking?

Kathleen McInnis: Right. Right.

Amb. Kelley Currie: What is wrong with-- why should I have to explain myself when I show up at a meeting on a security issue that's insane. That happened all the time. And why my office needed to be involved in working on the Indo-Pacific strategy? I'm like, you know, "Are there women in the Indo-Pacific?" <laugh> And going back to what I was saying before, do we have security partners who are interested Women, Peace, and Security?

Yes, we do. Vietnam wants us to co-host a Women, Peace, and Security conference with them. And I can't get a hundred thousand dollars out of the State Department to support it, to co-host with them. It's like, just take it out of my

I think because I am underestimated and I kind of come in under the radar, but it doesn't happen twice. I will tell you that. People don't underestimate me twice. <laugh>. Usually they figure it out pretty quick. But I think that that's a lot to do with it. Also, as a woman, you have to learn how to navigate these things and be a skillful, you know, one of my friends calls and says I was, "I'm a knife fighter." I'm like, I really don't like that. But just because I know how to work the system, it doesn't make me a knife fighter.

Kathleen McInnis: Right.

Amb. Kelley Currie: I think it just makes me a big policymaker that I understand what everybody's structures are. This is--because you know, I can't just make things happen. Like I'm not able to do that. I've always had to navigate around these obstacles.

Kathleen McInnis: Mm-hmm.

Amb. Kelley Currie: And so I guess it just makes me better at it. I have more practice. I can't just, you know, walk into a meeting and everybody just automatically wants to do what I say. No, that never, never happens. So I guess that I would say that's it. But I don't like to call them soft skills because that implies that they're not important. And I don't know why. But I think those soft skills are what make a lot of us successful. And also, I don't care who gets credit. That's the other thing. It's not important.

Kathleen McInnis: Right.

Amb. Kelley Currie: It's never really been important to me. Like the outcome is what's important. And I think you find with your male colleagues, that is not usually the case that they are more interested in. Not all of them, I shouldn't do that, but especially in places.

Kathleen McInnis: Well, it's the culture that prioritizes that. I feel like some of our male colleagues get trapped in it too.

Amb. Kelley Currie: Yes.

Kathleen McInnis: Right.

Amb. Kelley Currie: I think that's right. Although some of them also seem to enjoy it <laugh> and I think also it creates a toxic culture that women who think that they have to emulate that behavior.

Kathleen McInnis: Yeah.

Amb. Kelley Currie: And so it's really important to me when I'm mentoring young women and others be like, that's not the way you have to be. You don't have to be an obnoxious, self-promoting person to be successful. Like that's really not necessary. You do need to learn how to speak up for yourself, and assert yourself, and advocate for yourself, but you don't have to be that guy.

Kathleen McInnis: Yeah.

Amb. Kelley Currie: Don't be that guy.

Kathleen McInnis: Well, thank you so much, Ambassador Currie, for speaking with us today, for your fascinating insights into this sort of global picture and human rights, but also the deeply troubling Uyghur genocide. Thank you for sharing that experience. And I'm looking forward to continuing this conversation.

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