

Center for Strategic and International Studies

TRANSCRIPT

Smart Women, Smart Power
“The Establishment of the U.S.-Afghan Women’s Council”

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FEATURING

Ambassador Paula J. Dobriansky

Former Under Secretary of State for Global Affairs

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. Paula J. Dobriansky: So there were countless, countless women -- you can't imagine -- and men, who came forward and said, "How can we help?" So that's why we set up that council.

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, Smart Power Initiative at the Center for Strategic and International Studies for these incredible conversations.

In December, at the Reagan National Defense Forum, I sat down with Ambassador Paula Dobriansky, the former Undersecretary of State for Global Affairs, former President's Envoy to Northern Ireland, and the former National Security Council Director for European and Soviet Affairs in the Reagan administration. We made a conversation on her role in establishing the U.S. Afghan Women's Council.

Please excuse the extra noise from the hustle and bustle of the conference happening around us.

I am thrilled to welcome Ambassador Paula Dobriansky to the Smart Women, Smart Power podcast today, where we are recording from the Reagan National Defense Forum. I think that last time I saw you was in the Svalbard Islands in the Norwegian Arctic. We were snowmobiling for NATO, as I remember.

Amb. Paula J. Dobriansky: That's correct. That is correct. Yes. Yes. And actually, it was supposed to be sort of summertime or, or I could say springtime. It was very cold and there was snow. Indeed, we were Svalbard.

Kathleen McInnis: And to get us started, I'd love to get your story. What got you motivated to join this field?

Amb. Paula J. Dobriansky: Well, first, both of my parents, well, first, let me say, I'm delighted to be here today, <laugh>, and your enthusiasm is wonderful, really wonderful.

I had two parents, they're now deceased, but who were educators. And both of them, their parents on both sides were from Ukraine. And so my parents were always very heavily involved in international affairs. Very engaged. And I just have to say that seeped over to me to my sister. It was always very important not just to know about domestic situations and circumstances, but to understand the world at large -- to know about my heritage. So when I was thinking about where I wanted to go to school, actually, my father was a very strong advocate of my going to Georgetown University School of Foreign Service. So I did indeed, and there I was in the midst of just preparing for international politics, many go on to the foreign service. I didn't go into the foreign service, but my 30 some career in national security affairs certainly stems from the very strong foundation there, and from my family and my family's heritage.

Kathleen McInnis: That's wonderful. Well so, today you, we thought we could talk about your decision or your involvement in establishing the U.S. Afghan Women's Council. So, for our listeners who don't know about this, could you explain what it was and why it was needed at the time?

Amb. Paula J. Dobriansky: Well, I'd go back to the fact that the United States had a military onslaught, if you will -- an operation in Afghanistan, which was in response to 9/11. Because the roots of terrorism, and in particular at the time, Osama Bin Laden were traced to Afghanistan. So we had military on the ground there and engaged in an operation to crush not only well, the myriad of terrorists who were there, including the Taliban. So it was on that occasion in the aftermath when that was achieved. And in particular, I remember the last real military operation was in Mazar-i-Sharif, where there was a victory in Mazar-i-Sharif. At the time, many of us in the State Department and also in the Pentagon, were looking at, all right, here is the military operation, you have a lot of people who were saying, what are you going to do about Afghanistan? Are you just there, you know, for this? And then you're leaving.

Kathleen McInnis: Yeah, is it like a whackamole...?

Amb. Paula J. Dobriansky: Like, we're abandoned and you're just leaving. So here in particular, there were many, many Americans who saw on TV, women in burkas. Women who were being exploited, women who had all sorts of stories that they had told about, not being able to get medical assistance, being deprived of an education, et cetera, et cetera. So at the time, I was in the Bush administration, as you said, as an Undersecretary of State. And in particular, we were looking at what could we do?

And you know, what really brought about the U.S. Afghan Women's Council? Two things. First, there was an outpouring from the American public to the State Department seriously coming in and saying, what can we do to help Afghan women? And we had to figure out, how do we deal with this? Because there are governmental rules about what you can accept or gifts of kind or other types of things.

So that was the first, but the second was we also met Afghan women, and we wanted to know what they wanted. And so to answer the question, and then back over to you on the first, we actually set up the U.S. Afghan Women's Council. It was an initiative of Laura Bush. She also gave her famous radio address and about the need to help Afghan women. So that provided a structure to bring Americans together with, and not just government -- from the private sector. With Afghan women from all walks of life who wanted to come out and wanted to express themselves about what they need. So let me just tell you what they identified.

They were so definitive upfront as to what they needed. They said, "We want to have a focus on education." That was no surprise. They said, "We also want to focus on health, because maternal mortality is extremely high in our country. We need to figure out ways of bringing that down." They also focused on women's economic empowerment because there were women who wanted to own businesses, but were prevented from doing so. And the last one was governance. In particular, women who cared about the rule of law, who actually were prosecutors and were part of the judicial system before, and then wanted to ensure that there was rule of law, and that women could be more vibrant and active players in society. So hence the U.S. Afghan Women's Council arose.

Kathleen McInnis: And so you and the Afghans identify this need and it's, I just, when you say that the American population was also eager to contribute, I just found that fascinating.

Amb. Paula J. Dobriansky: Well I mean, may I explain? So we would get calls, letters, you name it. We had people, and especially women, predominantly women from across the United States saying, "I saw women in burkas. I saw that women's rights were suppressed. What can we do to help?" And then they would say, "We have 10 computers. Can we donate the computers? How can we get the computers in?" There would be others that would say, "By the way, we'd like to bring them to our university and actually have them as fellows and educate them, can we do that? Can we invite them? Will the State Department help us in getting them to our university?" So there were countless, countless women you can't imagine, and that's amazing. Who came forward and

said, "How can we help?" So that's why we set up that council, to A. find out what the Afghans themselves wanted and to channel this.

So we didn't just in a willy-nilly way, say, okay, give this, give that. But to find out what they really needed and wanted. And then secondly, to have some structure where there was some give and take. And then to take this goodwill,

Can I give you two examples? Connie Duckworth, who used to be formally an executive at Goldman Sachs, so she came forward to us and she said, "I would like to have Afghan women work with me on rugs. There are so many beautiful rugs. And I'd like to see if I can come together with those women who want to be empowered in that business sector." The result of that was the creation of Arzu, which means hope in, I believe in Dari.

And that is still functioning today. And their rugs have been actually exported to the United States. So here you have a woman who was in business on the American side, who also knew a lot about laws about product centering our country and all kinds of standards. And then there were women on the Afghan side who wanted to step forward and wanted to be part of this. So actually, she is, her operation is interestingly enough in Bamiyan and not in the capital, but in Bamiyan. And basically they've actually exported to the United States. There's another woman, Terry Neese operating out of Nebraska, and she wanted to bring women actually to the United States and help in the educational space with all kinds of skills. And they did it various ways where also the women were connected into in Afghanistan, and then also some were indeed brought to Nebraska where she runs an operation. So here you have actual Americans who volunteered step forward, wanted to create projects in the private sector and actually connect with Afghan women. And there are so many that I can mention to you That's amazing. And the council exists today. It's housed in Georgetown University. It's connected still to the State Department, but there's that private sector, public-private sector component to its existence.

Kathleen McInnis: So when you were establishing it on the Afghan side, you made the decision to have it reside within the Foreign Ministry right. As opposed to the Women's Ministry.

Amb. Paula J. Dobriansky: That is correct.

Kathleen McInnis: And so could you walk us through the thinking at the time on that?

Amb. Paula J. Dobriansky: Absolutely. So at the time when Colin Powell was Secretary of State, he hosted a lunch for Abdullah Abdullah who was the Afghan Minister of Foreign Affairs at the time. And specifically at that lunch, Secretary Powell had asked directly the Foreign Minister about the U.S. Afghan Women's Council. He indicated that that is something that we'd like to create. And that was also the wish of Mrs. Bush, who wanted to try to figure out how to actually advance women in Afghanistan.

Kathleen McInnis: And as you said, do it strategically, right? Like, because just like throwing stuff in, it just goes into the air. Like do it strategically.

Amb. Paula J. Dobriansky: Correct. So it was raised at the lunch. I said a few words, but to come to it specifically, we asked the foreign minister to become a member of the council. So a co-chair. So there were three co-chairs. One was the Foreign Minister, one was me as Undersecretary of State for Global Affairs. And the third one was the woman who was the minister in the Foreign Ministry. But the reason why we wanted it in the Foreign Ministry, and we wanted the three of us. First of all, I was with the State Department. She was with the Ministry of Women's Affairs. He was with obviously as foreign minister. We wanted to have it, I will use the word mainstream. Where it would deal with a variety of issues, not just sometimes where it gets stovepiped "women's issues." And in this case, the foreign minister readily accepted and actually always not only hosted, but attended the U.S. Afghan Women's Council meetings, which I think was significant in advancing an agenda that was a robust agenda in the four areas that I mentioned.

Kathleen McInnis: That's fascinating. And I've heard that sort of theme echoed in other countries and places where women get compartmentalized into the women's issues area of family, domestic concerns and, you know, childcare policy, those sorts of things. And kept away from the real decisions, real hardcore decisions of government, like national security.

Amb. Paula J. Dobriansky: I'll give you an example. At one of our U.S. Afghan Women's Council meetings, there was an Afghan woman who stood up and she said specifically to the minister, "I'd like to know when are we going to have more women ambassadors going out?" And he had cited that there was one Afghan woman who apparently was the representative in Bulgaria, I believe at the time. And she said, "That's wonderful, but one is not enough. We need to have more." And quite frankly, as you may know, where I think it has had an impact is actually there was an Afghan ambassador, not only to the United Nations, recently, but there was, this is pre-Taliban and the pre-situation now, but also a female Afghan ambassador to the United States.

Kathleen McInnis: Yeah. It's extraordinary what can happen when these women's issues and women are brought into the, the key decisionmaking spaces and put into these key positions, as opposed to, again, being put into the pet rock, sort of isolated stove, stovepiped kinds of initiatives.

Amb. Paula J. Dobriansky: I found in this case several things. First of all, I found that Afghan women were very definitive about their needs and the women, I'll also give you another example that was interesting. The Afghan women had a kind of federation, and originally they wanted to pair up with the men in getting monies, not just from the U.S. government, but looking a number of places. And at the time, the men in Afghanistan didn't opt for that. So the women decided to charge forward on their own. And to their credit, they got USAID funds, they got funds from elsewhere. Interestingly enough, the men did not fare so well. So then they approached them about joining forces. At that time, the women were already well advanced, and they said, "No, we already selected our projects. We don't need you. We're going to go forward."

So I have to say I was very impressed. I think that they had a vision of what they wanted to achieve. And they marched forward, and they actually achieved results. That's the tragedy in a way of, certainly of what happened in Afghanistan last year. I think it was unfortunate because there were a lot of achievements made, which some have certainly regressed. Others have relocated -- literally, meaning outside of Afghanistan. But I know that they're very determined to actually ensuring that they get that chance to still move forward.

Kathleen McInnis: Yeah. I mean, watching the, the women and girls protesting right now in Afghanistan, it's truly awe inspiring. So to wrap up our conversation. Do you feel that being a woman has impacted your, your decisions and the way the course of how the U.S. Afghan Women's Council was established? And if so, why? If not, why not?

Amb. Paula J. Dobriansky: Well, let me answer your question at several levels. First of all, I mentioned how Laura Bush as First Lady, she delivered an historic radio address on the President's radio, President Bush's radio. She was very vested in this. And what I think is commendable is that she has continued her interest at the Bush Center in Dallas. This is a priority for her. And she happens to be actually an honorary chair of the U.S. Afghan Women's Council. Hillary Clinton, as Senator and First Lady and in her current capacity, she too is an honorary chair. The goal is bipartisanship here. Yeah. In this effort. So the good news here is it's at that level where they are advancing it, and you have a unity of

purpose of two women who were at a, you know, high level in government and a bipartisan support.

Secondly, though, at the time of the advancement of the council, by the way, I would say that President Bush was also very vested in this. He met so many of the Afghan women who came through his personal engagement, also advanced the issue and advanced the work of the council. In fact, he hosted a rather historic U.S. Afghan Women's Council meeting at the White House where he was there, Laura Bush was there, Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld was there, Vice President Cheney was there. I'm serious. It was really, I'm not even mentioning everyone.

So that demonstrated that kind of unity of purpose. You had women who were definitive in defining the agenda and what they wanted. But in terms of who actually advanced it and pushed it forward, I would say to you it was a real collaborative effort. And lastly, on the Afghan side, I think the fact that we all agreed that it should be in the Foreign Ministry rather than in the Women's Ministry, had an influence as well on the outcome. The Foreign Minister also was actively involved. He was involved in also supporting the Afghan women's agenda and expanding on it. He attended all the meetings, his successor did as well. And I think that that too also ensured that its agenda was not narrow, but it was very broadly defined. So women played an important role in defining the agenda. But in terms of advancing it, I think that both men and women in collaborating and in a bipartisan way and in a cross-national way, really led it to what it is today. And even today, given the dire circumstances in Afghanistan, that nevertheless the U.S. Afghan Women's Council is in existence, a number of its projects are still thriving and bucking up against the tide and I know will be an important foundation for the future.

Kathleen McInnis: The importance of allyship and having a good team. Thank you so much Ambassador Dobriansky. This has been an amazing discussion.

Amb. Paula J. Dobriansky: Well, thank you. And I'm delighted to be here with you today. Thank you.

Kathleen McInnis: Subscribe to the Smart Women, Smart Power Podcast on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, or wherever you listen to great content. Be sure to follow us on Twitter @smartwomen, or you can follow me on Twitter @kjmccinnis1. Thanks for listening, and join us next time.

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