

Center for Strategic and International Studies

TRANSCRIPT  
Smart Women, Smart Power  
“Employee No. 1’ in Homeland Security”

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FEATURING  
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*Former Special Assistant to the Director of Homeland Security*

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.

Ashley Davis: And I decided to stay. So, there were a handful of us that stayed that day after everyone evacuated. And it was everything from, you know, the phones weren't working. The only thing that worked were those Nextel walkie talkies.

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.

Today I'm excited to speak with Ashley Davis, founding partner of West Front Strategies, LLC. Ashley has years of experience as a business leader and as a public policy expert, including her experience working on the strategic aftermath that followed the September 11th, 2001 attacks, where she worked in the Executive Office of the President as Deputy Director of Management and Administration, as well as a Special Assistant to the Director of Homeland Security. A role that we're going to get into a little bit more later during the podcast. But first of all, welcome Ashley. It's so, so great to have you here today.

Ashley Davis: Thank you for your service. Thank you so much, Kathleen. Thank you for having me.

Kathleen  
McInnis: So, we love to get started by learning our guests' origin stories. What brought them into the field, what inspired them, any role models that stood out along the way. So I'd love to hear what drew you into this crazy world of homeland and national security?

Ashley Davis: Well, politics in general. It was interesting when I was in my junior year in college, I met then Governor Tom Ridge, who was Governor of Pennsylvania. And really, this was not my major in college. Politics was not political science wasn't my major, but I really liked this guy and I was like, "Wow, what does it mean to like work for a governor?" So I ended up doing an internship for him my junior year, summer, and I never went back. So I ended up moving full-time to Harrisburg working for him. And then bit by bit started changing into not just the political world, but also the kind of business side of the political world, which is lobbying. And sometimes that can be a good or bad word these days. But, so I started doing some state lobbying, but then when, in 1999 when George Bush was getting ready to announce for president, every

governor, Republican governor in every state, giving staff people to the campaign. And so I was one of those, those staff people that worked on behalf of Ridge. So it was a fantastic experience traveling the country, going primary state, to primary state. And I always thought I'd go back to Harrisburg. I was happy there, but was offered a job. The job you mentioned the Deputy Director of White House Management Administration, which was kind of the caring and feeding of the White House. It wasn't, I do not want to say I had any experience with either, but you learn very quickly.

Kathleen  
McInnis: <laugh> I feel like it's, that's an on the job training kind of gig. <laugh>

Ashley Davis: Exactly. But one of the, which kind of is the purpose of kind of my story in a little bit, one of the offices that was under management administration was the White House Military Office. And for many the people that do or do not know, the White House Military Office runs the White House. Obviously. also, Air Force One and Marine One and the food at the White House, just everything. And so it was a great learning experience. And then 9/11 happened, and we can get into that story later and it just, my life kind of made a complete change. And Ridge, Governor Ridge, became down to become the first White House Director of Homeland Security. And then did that for two and a half years before the department was actually created, which no one like really remembers that time period because everyone just now remembers the department.

Kathleen  
McInnis: But at that time, you know, you are there, you're in the White House and you are there for the September 11th, 2001 attacks, which was obviously a game changer moment for our country, for the world. If you could set the scene for us, where were you, I mean, in the bill, how, what were you doing when you heard about the first plane hitting? What was that day like for?

Ashley Davis: It's interesting because I don't, I haven't started talking about this. Not for any other reason, just until real recently because you always want to worry about things that you say and not say. But I had a pretty amazing day that I feel that changed my life. I do want to answer your question real quick though. Could this happen today? Like, could we pass a piece of legislation like this? I would say yes because I think our country does very well in a time of crisis. The legislation that was passed during Covid, for example, or if there's something else, I do think that we do become grown-ups. We, the broader, we politicians do become grown-ups in a time that needs to happen. And this one, our department wouldn't have happened for people besides like Jane

Harman and you know Senator Lieberman and obviously all the Republicans as well.

Kathleen  
McInnis: But I mean, there were really good leaders on both sides of the aisle. But September 11th, so I, my office was in the West Wing basement and I was waiting, it was right beside the situation room, which for those that are tuning in may know it's on the ground floor. And ironically, President Bush Senior stopped by my office, the dad, to say hello because my boss at the time, where we shared West Wing office space is not like that show we used to watch *The West Wing*. I mean, it's like this big, you know, so we're all on top of each other.

Ashley Davis: But it's actually sort of making like, it's like a foot big and like <laugh> she's got like three square feet and there's an air conditioner taking up a foot in half it.

And no windows, you know, on the ground floor especially. Anyway, so the president, my old boss used to work for President Bush 41. And so, and this was right when he stopped by to say hello. The first plane just hit, but everyone was like just watching on TV and he's like, "Have you heard about this?" And I was just like, you know "What? Crazy?" Within 10-15 minutes, people in black came out of parts of that building that I never saw before, out of my ceiling actually, and took the president away. And it was right when the second plane was hitting. And so at that point the, my boss was like, we need to start evacuating people. And so I ran up the steps to try to get everyone off the second and first floor of the West Wing. I mean, obviously the Secret Service and the executive office building were evacuating those people.

And the stories that you see about that of "take off your shoes and run" like that was all happening in the building across the street. But, so I was running up to the first floor- the Vice President's Office. Mary Matalin was there, you know, just getting them all, everyone out of the building. And it was interesting because we, the vice president was whisked away to the bunker, you know, as well at the time. But we, the West Wing staff, a lot of them that didn't leave the building right away. We were in the White House Mess, which was food, dining room in the White House. And that was when the Pentagon hit. And so at that point, everyone was sitting ducks because they didn't know where all these other planes were going. This was before Flight 93 went down in Pittsburgh, but it was right, we watched the Pentagon being hit there. And so they were taking everyone to get out.

And my boss at the time, who was head of management administration, White House [inaudible], he is like, "Listen, you can stay or you can leave. I have no idea what's happening. I have no idea what's going to

happen after." And so I think I made a very crucial decision, like with your talking points right there. And I decided to stay. So there were a handful of us that stayed that day after everyone evacuated. And it was everything from, you know, the phones weren't working. The only thing that worked were those Nextel walkie talkies that like one or two GSA people had. But you know, there were people in the bunker trying to call the sit room. I mean, so it was all of that. And it was so interesting.

And then as the day went on and counting down the planes, you know, 120 planes, 60 planes, 50 planes. And so what was interesting was as the day went on, I still didn't, I never heard of Al-Qaeda. I wasn't in national security. Like I had no idea what that was. But the president was coming, they were finally letting the president come back and he was addressing the nation. So they were changing the oval into a, so he could do TV from the Oval Office. And so since there was like no staff there, like a couple of us, I was asked to go greet the president coming off the Marine One, which was a different Marine One than normal Marine One because we were at war for all practical purposes, right? Or under attack. And so I just went out just because they have to have someone out there greeting them.

And he got off the plane and we would never forget this, you know, saluted the Marine like a commander in chief and was, you know, said something to me that I along the lines of, "We are, you know, we are under attack, we are at war." And I was like, "Wow." And then, so from that moment on, I never realized how much Al-Qaeda, homeland security, you know, national security were really going to be, become a part of my life. But, and it just happenstance like after that day how I continued into the homeland space. But long story short, I ended up staying in the White House for days as we were dealing with stuff. But it was a, it was a crucial time in my life that I felt that if I didn't make that decision, I probably wouldn't have had the same path as I have now.

Kathleen  
McInnis:

That's incredible. So you're there in the White House trying to make things work. Seeing, I mean, at a very tangible, like actual like tactile level, some of the problems with coordination and how to coordinate an effective response when the phones aren't even working. How did the idea of establishing a new Department of Homeland Security, when, when did that start to come up?

Ashley Davis:

Well this first was -- so the White House Office that was created first for those first two years. And that I, after the attacks, the vice president and the president really took the lead on creating that mirror of the National Security Council, which Condi Rice was running at the time. And so the Homeland Security Office was that, and that's how they created it.

Kathleen  
McInnis:  
Ashley Davis:

Was there thinking that that would be sufficient at the time or?

I think they felt, "Oh my gosh, we were just attacked on U.S. soil. We need to have the counterpart of the NSC to really make sure that our homeland is safe." I mean, I never would happen. So that was the model. And there's still a White House Office of Homeland Security Council. Ridge was announced at the State of the Union, the special session on October 8th. So really not that long after. So he, Ridge knew Bush and Cheney for years. I think they were like, "We need somebody that has a presence. Governor understands state and local coordination and all of that to kind of be the face that rest assured that people are, you know, that America's going to be safe again." So he stepped down, you know, between September 11th and October 8th, he stepped down from governor. His first day was October 11th, and there were eight of us.

So going back to your, I mean, we did not have an infrastructure, we didn't have the money for staff -- we're like eight staff. And then everyone else had to be detailed from other agencies. So like, DoD had to give us staff and all this stuff. And so out of the eight, none of us except one who was a retired admiral, knew anything about homeland security. It was more just like we knew the people that were loyal to the mission of the president and the Bush administration and what needed and cared about the country. I was actually employee number one for the White House Office of Homeland Security, which I never knew. And I was like, "Wow!" I just found out like six months ago. And I'm like, "I didn't know that." And I said, "Even before Tom [Ridge]?" They're like, "Well, you're, you just got cleared faster because you were already staff." <laugh>

It wasn't like I was a big deal. So they wanted Tom in the West Wing. And so Tom and I moved up one floor. So my office was between the vice president's and the Roosevelt room beside the oval. And Tom and I literally were in a cubby with like another, you know, three people. So he went from becoming governor of the fifth largest state in the country to like, you know, being a staffer, which he was.

And so we worked, I would say that first 18 months was dealing with the Shoe Bomber, dealing with anthrax, dealing with this plane going down, dealing with these secret, you know, plots that people, you know, were plotting around the country. It was really a hand-to-hand combat and the people that really gave up their lives literally would come into the office and SWAT and the other building just to be a part of the mission.

And really dedicated people that really helped save this country from, you know, knock on wood, we haven't been attacked again, but there are definitely still things that need to be worked on. But I think probably within 18 months that the conversation started that a better coordination between the federal government at least needed to happen. And so that's where the conversation with and obviously had to be an act of Congress to create a department which hadn't been created for 50 years. I forget the exact date right now, but, and so it combined, DHS combined all these different agencies and it's still tough. I mean, it's still "Is the secret service really talking to immigration? Is immigration really talking to the critical infrastructure?" Not just from a homeland security point, but just the bureaucracy of such a big building. And so I would say almost 20 years later from when the department itself was actually stood up, I mean, you have had really good directors that have taken it from Tom still being the face of national security to then Michael Chertoff who kind of put the, was really good at the nuts and bolts of coordinating all these different departments that came together.

And then you had people like former governors like Napolitano and people like that really have changed and made the department what it is today. But I don't know if you've had someone talk about cybersecurity in the past on your podcast, but, you know, I think we're a long way off on like cybersecurity security. I don't know if we have a national good process in place. So, I think we have a long way to go, but I think we've done a lot as well.

Kathleen  
McInnis: Going back to those early days when you're in [the] White House for homeland security is established, the National Security Council is this bureaucratic organizational model for it -- how was the interface between the homeland security group and NSC at that time? Was it, were there frictions and tensions because of, or was it everybody working towards the same mission?

Ashley Davis: I think, first of all, Tom respected and really respected Condi and Condi really respected Tom. So when you have leaders like that at the top that are telling staff to like, "make things work," actually our biggest arguments at the time were with DoD because we needed DoD staff and they didn't, you know, DoD didn't want to be giving their staff to DHS because they were, you know, we, this was when we were getting ready for Afghanistan.

Kathleen  
McInnis: Oh right, right, right. Interesting.

Ashley Davis: We didn't really conflict that well with NSC and I think it could have been a conflict if it wasn't for those two leaders. But even to this day,

there's not that much. Like you would think that there would be a lot of like turf battles. Not really. It really does have its own distinction. NSC has just been, is so well run. I mean, we were like the bad news bears trying to get things together and they were like the adults in the room, you know?

Kathleen  
McInnis: Totally. So over 20 years have past, how do you view the role of DHS today? You mentioned that it could probably be a little bit more forward leaning on cybersecurity. Is there anything else that you think of from that initial vision to where it is today and what it could be doing differently?

Ashley Davis: I personally think, and this is like an okay thing, it went from the hottest department in town to now like another bureaucracy. Like it's not a department that's making major- and that's part of the point of it because there's a lot of things that are classified right. And there's a lot of things that we shouldn't be knowing. And if DHS is doing their job, then we are not getting attacked. Or they put, you know, we don't know. And, I don't have this information anymore, because I'm not obviously staff anymore, but like, we have no idea, you and I sitting here, how many terrorist plots that were still unraveling, you know, that the normal public don't know and shouldn't know, you know, it's good to be oblivious at this time. I mean, I remember when I left the White House and then you go through that mourning period of not knowing everything that you used to know, but then at the same time it was like, "Oh wow, I don't have to worry about another Shoe Bomber that's going to blow up a plane."

You know? I mean, like, it's like serious stuff that you are carrying around on you that you're not allowed to talk about. So to go back to your point, I do think that the department [is] very bureaucratic, they all are. But I do think that they're doing their job, but there could always be tweaks. I mean there, I think that the, obviously the most public thing that's happening right now is down on our borders. And what does that mean in regards to the people that are coming over legally? Not legally? I don't even want to get into that conversation, but just what's coming over with these people. So I think that DHS is probably not getting a great look because of that, but I'm not sure if the American people really understand that the border is part of DHS, you know, the Department of Homeland Security anyway.

Kathleen  
McInnis: Yeah. Fair enough. Smart Women, Smart Power, love to get your sense of whether or not your being a woman has impacted how you've approached some of these decisions and approached some of these issues and supporting these principles during these critical times. If you think being a woman has had an impact, why, and if not, why, why not?

Ashley Davis: This is such a complicated question to me all the time, because I do feel that all of us that were in the West Wing at the time under Bush were, I mean we had a lot of women that were in senior positions too, like Karen Hughes and obviously Condi, but all of us that were, or late twenties, early thirties, were all the principals' special assistants. And I would argue now, like we were the ones that were really holding the glue together for our principals, which was our job. Right? And so, and because we were so close to our principal, whether it was Andy Card or Joe Hagin or Tom Ridge, we all knew that we were talking for our bosses and that decisions could be made or like if, if Tom needed a plane because he needed to go somewhere and I would go to the person that would have to do it. I knew she was speaking for her boss who makes those decisions. Right? So I think that we were the glue. Do I think that there was definitely a difference of maybe some of the travel and things like that? I did not do a lot of travel then with him because I think like the whole woman travel with men. I mean, I do think that there was a lot of just, "Oh, here's this young girl, here's an older man. You don't want to be like traveling together unless there's a bunch of people." You know, just that type of stuff, which would, would never happen with boys. I don't want to say I didn't travel because of that. It's just there was always that, "Oh, if Ashley or so-and-so's going to go, well so-and-so should go because he can like be the aide to Tom." You know, stuff like that.

So, which was fine. But I do have, you know, since that I also feel that I've gotten a lot, a lot of opportunities because I'm a woman. I feel that even though I wasn't like Tom Ridge during Homeland Security, at least I lived with the story I just told you from, you know, I know enough about this world that there's not very many people in Homeland Security that are women. There's not a lot of people that are in national security that are women. I think that we're building on that. But I do think that I probably had more like speaking opportunities and things like that now because of the fact that I am a woman. So I always had this complicated and one of my main missions in life is like supporting women, supporting new women, supporting people that were me at 26 or 25 or 35 and how do you bring them along and electing more women to Congress. So this is a very near and dear, but I've never felt victimized for being a woman at all.

Kathleen  
McInnis: And it's so complicated. Right? I never wanted to talk about, you know, being a, being the woman national security person, like it gender never really factored into my worldview or thinking and how I've gotten opportunities or not. And until very recently. But the answer it seems to be, it's just complicated <laugh>, right? And there's just so many

different ways gender and other things intersect and who we are and how we approach our careers and our lives.

Ashley Davis: Exactly. And I think that if you do the work and as you've mentioned, especially after the first, you know, several months, when all these new people were coming to the White House for Homeland stuff, at first they were like, "Who's this young girl?" But then I think they, over the time when, because Tom empowered me to be his voice, that everyone realized, "Okay, this person I do have to deal with and will deal with, I don't care if she, what she is, what color she is, what gender she is whatever, all of the above." And, just took me serious as a team member, but it, you know, then I had to, I went to a law firm that was one of the only, you know, one of very few women and I had to start proving yourself all again. And then, you know, you just have to, I always say to younger generations, especially like, you know, "We all work seven days a week for a long time, and not that people don't, but I, it's not like I just got something handed to me or I made that choice to turn around instead of walking out of the West Wing basement where I turned around and went back in." Right. And so I think that those decisions in life that are presented to you or you plan on your own, and there's, I can go on for other things that I've actually planned so I can do what I want to do next. But you know, you have to take those opportunities and run with them and do the best you can. And no matter if you're a girl or boy or whatever.

Kathleen  
McInnis: Well, thank you so much for joining us today on the podcast. It's been such a fascinating conversation. I really appreciate your time.

Ashley Davis: Thank you so much. It's been super fun.

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 at @smartwomen, or you can follow me on Twitter at @kjmccinnis1. Thanks for listening and join us next time.

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