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TRANSCRIPT

Smart Women, Smart Power

"Three Years Later: A Conversation with Gayle E. Smith, the CEO of the ONE Campaign, on Covid-19"

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FEATURING

Gayle E. Smith

CEO, ONE Campaign

CSIS EXPERTS

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Kathleen McInnis: Good afternoon. I'm Dr. Kathleen McInnis, Director of the Smart Women, Smart Power Initiative and Senior Fellow in the International Security Program, at CSIS. Today, we are delighted to host Gayle Smith, the President and CEO of the ONE Campaign. Not only is Gayle heading up one of the top global campaigns to end poverty and preventable disease, Gayle has served as a top advisor on international issues for three American presidents, including holding a critical role in the Biden administration's effort to end the global Covid-19 pandemic. She's also one of the world's leading experts on global development and global health security.

Before we get started, I'd like to say a huge thank you to our supporters at Citi. Because of their support, we can bring you so many of these fascinating and insightful conversations.

So welcome, Gayle. Thank you so much for being here. So to get us started, I love to learn people's origin stories. What got you into this field of international development?

Gayle Smith: A really crummy boyfriend. [Kathleen laughs] It's a true story. It's a true story because you want to say from the time I was in the third grade, I wanted to grow up and do what I'm doing now, and that's not the case. I'd studied mathematics. I can't even understand some of the papers I wrote in college at this point. But I was traveling after I graduated and broke up with my boyfriend and kept going. And it was one of those things that I got a good education. I'd been to college, I listened to the news or read the news, and suddenly there was this whole world out there, I was in Egypt, and then I was in Sudan, that exposed me to things that, quite frankly, I hadn't learned enough about in either school or from the media. So I got a job doing research that led to my becoming a stringer, a reporter for the BBC on African affairs in the East African Horn. And things just took off from there. So it was a lot of, as I say, I did the college degree, but my real education was in the field.

Kathleen McInnis: Wow. In Egypt, and then the Horn of Africa--

Gayle Smith: Egypt, and then Sudan, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Somalia, the whole--

Kathleen McInnis: And that's a critical time then as well. I mean, the famine, the different crises, there's a lot--

Gayle Smith: Exactly. It was a period of, and unfortunately it's being repeated a bit now, but it was a period of war everywhere. And in the mid 1980s, the biggest famine in recorded history, and that was the event that changed my life the most. It was a famine that unfolded in the midst of a war,

and largely because of a war. It was a combination of war and drought, and close to a million people died that the world could have reached, but politics prevented them from reaching them. And that was like the game changer. Nobody should live in that degree of poverty, and nobody should be in a position where politics is between them and survival.

Kathleen McInnis: The politics. [Gayle: it's international politics] How famine is in some ways distinct from other kinds of crises too, because it's often governance that --

Gayle Smith: Famine is more manmade than not mean. Drought is, well, you could argue with climate change, but famines are mostly manmade and they're preventable. I mean, right now there is a famine looming in Somalia. It is preventable, but we inch closer to it every day, every week, every month. And the world hasn't quite yet stepped up to stop us from getting to that point.

Kathleen McInnis: So turning to another kind of crisis or catastrophe. [Gayle: I'm just trying to be honest.] We're at CSIS, we think about the world's catastrophes a lot. But during your times in both the Clinton and the Obama White Houses, you were arguably instrumental in sounding the alarm bells with the interagency on the emergence of global pandemics in Clinton years, HIV/AIDs, Ebola during Obama. So given typical bureaucratic resistance to emerging issues, how did you go about galvanizing a response from the U.S. and getting the mechanisms of state to pay attention to these issues?

Gayle Smith: Well, there wasn't in fact a great deal of bureaucratic resistance. At the end of the Clinton administration, it was becoming exceedingly clear that the AIDS epidemic was going to just devastate developing countries. And so we were sort of on the cusp towards the end of the administration of putting some things in place. And then of course, George Bush thankfully launched PEPFAR as a really, really, really big move. And I think, President Clinton was a president who appreciated science, and the science was there and the facts were there. He appreciated data. And the data was stunning because at that time, what was happening with HIV and AIDS is that it was affecting people more in urban centers. Remember, this was a while ago, a lot of able-bodied producers and workers. So it was carving out the most productive elements of society who then were also unable to provide care for those younger and older than them. So you could just see the impact on governments, on business people. It was breathtaking, and the projections were even more frightening. So I think those things caught the attention of the senior leadership, including the president, and

certainly caught the attention of President Bush. It was one of the things we briefed that team on when they came in. And thankfully-

Kathleen McInnis: They just ran with it. Yeah. Well then with the Ebola outbreak, I just remember watching that, and then the military got involved with the response, and there was, at least on the DoD side concern that it was detracting from core missions of fighting and winning the nation's wars. And how did you interact with or work with the-

Gayle Smith: Well, the way that happened was that the initial response for a period of time to the Ebola epidemic was from the Centers for Disease Control and the U.S. Agency for International Development, each doing their bit, and they fit together very well in crises like these. And what was happening is that between CDC and USAID, which increased six or eight fold in terms of their presence and the extraordinary NGOs that were on the ground, there were a number of NGOs who were really the earliest responders. It was clear that the underlying infrastructure to manage the spread of the Ebola virus was insufficient. That there weren't enough Ebola treatment units, the ability to get samples from rural areas to urban areas to test the ability to get labs out into the field, to really, it's a fast moving virus. And so the conclusion, I was coordinating an interagency process at the time, I remember one very fateful call where I pulled every agency on the line and said, do you think we can go faster than the virus the way we're operating now?

Or do you think we have to go back and suggest that we may need military support to help build that infrastructure? And every single agency said, "We're not going to be able to move faster." So the reason to go to the military was for that underlying infrastructure and support. And there wasn't a lot of resistance to be frank, because one of the things that I think people are not that aware of is that in a crisis response, whether it's Ebola or an earthquake or anything else, the military often comes in behind the U.S. Agency for International Development to provide lift and other support. So it was different because it was a virus, and that was daunting. And this was a scary, very-

Kathleen McInnis: It's a very scary virus.

Gayle Smith: -contagious virus. But that's the reason that the military was deployed.

Kathleen McInnis: And was prepared for because of all the humanitarian assistance and the logistical support.

Gayle Smith: Right. I mean, it was a different kind of operation, but they were used to deploying in emergencies and crises.

Kathleen McInnis: You were confirmed as USAID administrator at about the time that one of my colleagues at the Congressional Research Service, Ron O'Rourke, calls it the shift in strategic areas. Russia had illegally annexed Crimea, the Syrian refugee crisis, China was building islands in the South China Sea. The lines between war and peace were getting blurrier and hard and soft power also blurrier. So in the middle of all this, you're sitting at USAID, how did you view the U.S.'s preparedness and capability to respond to multiple simultaneous crises in the shifting world?

Gayle Smith: In many, many ways, I responded to that and I thought about that. I mean, one was I had the good fortune, and you see this in some administrations of having a president who understood our role in the world as offensive and defensive, as hard power and soft power, and had been very supportive from day one. In fact, from the time of the election of the kind of work that USAID does. So that was a really strong foundation, and that continued throughout the administration. I mean, that experience of responding to the Ebola epidemic, President Obama put a huge amount of his own political capital into that. I mean, he called every leader on the planet to say, "How many healthcare workers? What are you going to have in place? Give me labs. Move." So there was that to build on. So I think the environment, if you will, within the government was pretty positive recognition that all these things were important and there wasn't as much tension, I think, around the relative merits of hard and soft power as there may have been at previous times or even now into the future. I think the challenge for USAID and for NGOs, for governments and communities themselves, is that the crises are so many, and of such long duration that they are carving out the time, resources, and investments that could and should be going into development and prevention. So the balance is shifting. The amount of the budget in USAID still now is increasing of what's needed for these humanitarian crises. And that means there's less to invest in preventing them. And that's the hardest, that's the biggest problem we've got.

Kathleen McInnis: So, while you were sitting during your tenure as USAID administrator, did your thinking on the kinds of activities that the USAID is doing and needs to do shift, or was it-?

Gayle Smith: It shifted before I got to USAID. I mean, I think one of the things that I went into the administration wanting to do and for which I had the support of the incoming president was strengthen our development capacity, kind of elevate development, these three-legged stools. And I hate all these analogies, but there you go. We did a policy directive,

presidential policy directive that had never been done. There had never been a presidential directive on a development policy that was kind of interesting. So we spent a lot of time in the first term turning that around. It was at that time that USAID started participating in principals meetings and deputies meetings in high level meetings. That's a big deal when you've got that voice at the table. So those things started shifting early in the administration. So by the time I got to USAID, I think there was an understanding, and I think this was shared by most of the Congress at the time, that we needed a really strong capable USAID, for both things, humanitarian crises, but also development.

Similarly, MCC is I think, extremely important in this. So what I left with was, I think two concerns. One is that, again, with the balance shifting and greater demand to respond to crises, we are at risk of spending much, much more on responding to a problem than we are investing in preventing it is number one. And number two is the budget just isn't where it needs to be. And I know it's hard, but these are investments that make a real difference for the United States. And if that ever becomes a political football, that's going to be a problem.

Kathleen McInnis: Well, and you've had senior defense leaders making that case too before Congress.

Gayle Smith: They're some of the best arguments inside government and outside government for a robust civilian budget have come from the military. And I was very grateful for that. They've got some influence those guys.

Kathleen McInnis: A little. [laughs]

Gayle Smith: Speak up and say, "No, [inaudible] we want USAID in the room." Yeah. Got it.

Kathleen McInnis: Well, so turning to the Covid-19 pandemic. So in April 2021, the Biden administration asks you to take leave from the ONE campaign and join the effort to become the coordinator for the global Covid-19 response and the health security team. My first question, wow, that's a huge role. How did your working on the other pandemics inform your approach going in?

Gayle Smith: I think it reinforced the notion that while this was a new virus, I think, what we've learned from HIV and Ebola is that we know a lot; that scientists and medical and health professionals are our friends; and that the response is in many ways quantitative. If you think about different kinds of threats- if you think about something like terrorism

that may be quantitative, but it's also very qualitative in terms of how you've got to think about ideology and a number of other things. I think with a virus, you can plot a path. And again, it was a new virus. And so the path changed as more and more data and evidence came in. So I went into it, or I actually, the pandemic had been going on for a while by then, but I observed the pandemic thinking, this is a terrible thing, but boy, do we have the tools to fight it. We've got all sorts of tools to fight it. So that's what I took in is that we've got all the tools. It turned out it, was very, very different than I think the responses to HIV and aids and a bullet by a long shot.

Kathleen McInnis: Why?

Gayle Smith: Because it got politicized from the very beginning. And a virus is a virus. Virus doesn't really care what state you're from or anything else. And I think that got in the way of the facts and the fact-based decisions that I think could have enabled us to move faster and been more effective all over the world.

Kathleen McInnis: So what was it like when you arrived into the government that spring? Can you set scene for us?

Gayle Smith: I think the administration was very poised to do more on the global front. I think he was feeling increasingly confident, not they weren't declaring victory, but increasingly confident that the pandemic in the United States was coming under control. Remember, we had vaccines.

And a Secretary of State who was keenly interested in two things, the first being what can and should we be doing to help bring this pandemic to an end outside our borders? And the second is, boy, how do we need to think about this in the long term? Because these are threats- Secretary Blinken served in the same administrations I did. He had seen HIV and aids. He'd seen Ebola. It's very evident we're going to get more threats like these. And so he had a keen interest in the Department's role in the longer-term global health security, and how do we prepare for this in the future? So I walked into a very open, eager and enthusiastic environment, which is very helpful.

Kathleen McInnis: And in terms of organizing the bureaucracy. So you've got this leadership change, that's everybody's very supportive. And how did you start getting the mechanisms of State to start moving towards activities to end the pandemic?

Gayle Smith: There are parts of the State Department that work on these issues. They weren't all concentrated in one place. So within state, it was pulling

those various pieces together. The office was organized as part of the Secretary's office, which helps.

If you're part of the "seventh floor," that's always a positive thing, but still, you've got to work with a system and an institution that is built in a particular way. And it meant a lot of close collaboration with health and human services, with USAID, with National Security Council. So all of those things were necessary. That wasn't that challenging to put together. I think the challenge was, we wanted to focus on vaccines. Because there's a huge demand for vaccines, and most low and low-middle income countries had quite frankly been squeezed out of the market. And so there was a real urgency to getting that moving. I had extraordinary cooperation from the White House team, Jeff Zients, who's now the Chief of Staff, who was then leading the Covid-19 effort. And we built a machine to provide vaccines to other countries, basically.

Kathleen McInnis: [Laughs] Just like you do.

Gayle Smith: Just like you do, and it's harder than you think. You don't just put those vaccines on a plane and say, "Yo, they're arriving at 9:30."

Kathleen McInnis: Again because logistics--

Gayle Smith: It's logistics, it's legal, it's regulatory on both ends. They've got to be transported in a certain way. It's challenging, but we moved a lot of vaccines.

Kathleen McInnis: Well, as you departed the Biden administration in that role, what were your takeaways or impressions on where we need to invest or improve to be better prepared for the next pandemic?

Gayle Smith: Oh, there are so many ways. And I think the first is, and look, this is a problem. I referred to it at the beginning of our conversation. At the height of a crisis, the world tends to be pretty good at responding. Most of it, much of it. As the crisis recedes, people are like, "Oh yeah, we don't really need to worry about that. Now we have to worry about these other 17 crises that are unfolding." So the biggest gap we have right now is kind of the attention span. Is we learned a lot from the Covid pandemic, which by the way hasn't been declared over yet. So we know much of what's needed in terms of surveillance, in terms of ensuring the kind of speed of developing countermeasures. This was the case in Covid, all these kinds of things. What we don't quite have yet is the global political leadership to make sure all of that happens and the

commitment to coordination, which is necessary. That was another problem, is there was not the global coordination that there was in Ebola in other cases. So I came out concerned that there are a lot of gaps; encouraged that we know what the gaps are; and I think very encouraged by the Secretary of State's point of view, which is very focused on this and building more capacity within State. But again, there's lots other crises and it's very easy for the world to move on.

Kathleen McInnis: Well, actually turning to these multiple simultaneous crises, in your current capacity, how are you leading the ONE campaign? How are you thinking about how we should be managing or preparing for multiple simultaneous crises?

Gayle Smith: And they get called the polycrisis. I don't like any of these words. It kind of skirts over the fact that, okay, you've got a pandemic, then a food crisis, climate change, and an energy crisis, and inflation. Other than that, everything's fine. The common denominators are what we try to look at. And what are the common denominators for a majority of the world's countries? They don't have the resilience needed to withstand all of these external shocks. Right? In the United States, we passed, what, three supplementals worth trillions of dollars. Well, you can't do that in a whole lot of countries. You don't have that to fall back on. You don't have a FEMA that can go in and provide housing for everybody for an extended period of time. So how do we invest in that resilience? Our focus has been on the international financial institutions, and particularly the World Bank and the other multilateral development banks.

They're not moving enough capital to make a dent in this resilience gap. And there are proposals out there that have come from the G20 on how you can increase those numbers. We're pushing pretty hard for that to happen. Because we need more capital and we need to invest it in that thing called resilience. Because we're going to see nothing but external shock, after external shock, after external shock. You may have noticed they're kind of accelerating. Yeah. There's more of that on the horizon. So I think we've really got to do that. And the conundrum there is, and this is true for any of us in our personal lives or anything else, what's right in front of your face is easier to focus on than something that even though you know better, if you were doing that now, you'd be in a better position in six months.

Kathleen McInnis: And it gets back to the immediacy versus preparedness and the different-

Gayle Smith: Preparedness is not sufficiently out there in the discourse, in the discussions, in debates about national security. It's out there. It's still

out there mostly among people who come from the world of evil viruses. And it's not out there sufficiently. It needs to literally infect the entire discourse. Maybe we need a preparedness virus. [Laughs]

Kathleen McInnis: [Laughs] Well, so from your current vantage point, what humanitarian aid or development issue are you seeing on the horizon that is keeping you up at night? Because the discourse right now is so focused on Ukraine, are there any other hotspots that you're worrying about?

Gayle Smith: There's no shortage of hotspots. I think what- I worry about where the food crisis is going. I think that's going to get a lot worse before it gets a lot better. But I think the other crisis that is looming in this is a real crisis of inequity. And I think it's manifesting in a number of ways. The whole world's been through a pandemic. Some countries were able to get through it. Other countries, 60% of low-income countries are looking at a debt crisis. And it's the pandemic and these other shocks. And I think this will surprise you with everything that's going on in the world- the world is not quite hanging together and joining forces in the way it might . [Laughs] Newsflash! There's some division out there, and I get that, and I understand why there is the division and the tension. But the consequence when we're dealing with a number of global shocks is that I think we're leaving on the table our collective power to reduce the impact and prepare for the future shocks. And that's a big trade-off. And I'm not at all suggesting that support for the people of Ukraine is not important. It's vitally important for obvious reasons, but I think we're going to have to be able to do both and find some ways that we can get more global cooperation on some of these things. Or we're going to start to see divisions that I think will come back to haunt us.

Kathleen McInnis: Turning to gender, one of the things, Smart Women, Smart Power. One of the things, at least I've observed, is that when it comes to national security informed policymaking, that gender tends to be an afterthought, if not a blind spot. Given the leading role that you've played in multiple administrations and in and out of government. I'm curious, do you agree? And if so, ought we be thinking about gender and its implications more robustly in our national security and foreign policies? And how do we go about doing so?

Gayle Smith: I don't want to reduce the importance of doing so because as a matter of principle, it is right. But I want to make the point that it's also smart. And the way to convince people, I think that it's also smart, is to drown them in data. And I don't think, I think we've got a lot of very powerful data that tells stories ranging from how much more productive an economy can be if girls are educated and have equal access to finance and other opportunities or all sorts of things. But I don't know that we

have as much data as we need, disaggregated, to show the real impacts and opportunity costs of having gender be a kind of nice to do. And "Oh, by the way, we really care about gender," as opposed to thinking about it more deeply and structurally and systematically. We're not there yet. We're not there yet. I don't know that it's an afterthought. I think we're at a point where a lot of people know you're supposed to talk about it and you should have a gender piece to this or that, but I don't think it's not woven in, it's not integrated.

Kathleen McInnis: It's not in the bloodstream.

Gayle Smith: Right, it's not in the bloodstream.

Kathleen McInnis: Well, maybe adding a bit of data to qualitative data to the case, in the different positions that you've held, do you think that being a woman has influenced your approach to the decisions that you've taken or your approach to the issues with which you've grappled?

Gayle Smith: Yeah, I think so. Now, I'm not the most conventional person that's ever served in government. Kind of. There were people the first time I served, they were like, "Oh my God, they're letting her in." And that helps actually. You just need to sometimes say things. So I think that helps. But I think the difference I see is, and in a world that's changing, I will say, the national security field, even in the time that I've had the privilege to serve, you look at President Obama's national security team, and it was a majority of women, even at the highest levels in his second term. But I think a lot of it is about process and process. I don't mean like bureaucratic process. I mean, how do you get from analyzing a problem to solving it? What is the process of analyzing it? And I don't want to suggest that we as women analyze it perfectly. And those men really have huge challenges. I think the field has grown up in a very male hard power universe. And what I'm seeing is more and more women are involved in the field, is not any diminution of understanding of hard power, but is an increase in the understanding that it's not quite as linear as that. So that's number one. And then it's the process of how decisions are made, how debates take place, who's at the table, who speaks at the table. I want to be very careful of sweeping generalizations. In my experience, I think women tend to be a bit better than men at encouraging that broader, "What do you think? What do you think?" Making sure people are heard, bringing up points that may be seen as extraneous, but actually are not extraneous. People just think they're extraneous.

Kathleen McInnis: So it's the holism.

Gayle Smith: It's the holism, yeah.

Kathleen McInnis: So I heard that you and a former NSC colleague had a dream about writing the "Girl's Guide to National Security."

Gayle Smith: Yeah, it was a relief valve, right? We'd be in a meeting, and you couldn't take your phone into meetings, so you couldn't text this, but write a note just say, "girls guide, get that girl's guide." And a lot of it was just about odd things that would happen. And let me put it this way, I was in a conversation recently with some members of Congress about the future of the U.S. and the world and crises and train wrecks and all of that. And I was talking about soft power, and I said, "Soft power isn't just girls trying to be nice." Right? But that's, you look at a table at who's talking about the soft power tools. It tends to be more women than men. How do you translate that? How do you, I think one chapter we had in the outline of the book, we really should do this book-

Kathleen McInnis: You should definitely do this book.

Gayle Smith: We could be really, really cheeky. Is act like you're supposed to be in the room. Right. Don't start your sentence with, "Sorry, could I just make a point?" No, no, no. You don't need to apologize. Just go. "Be quiet. I'd like to make a point." So it's those kinds of things. And I will say the majority of the men that I have worked with when I've been in government have enough awareness that you can also use humor to get at some of this, which is the other thing that we felt very strongly about. I mean, anger's okay for a while, but it doesn't really get you anywhere.

Kathleen McInnis: Yeah. It just makes people more cranky and things repeat.

Gayle Smith: Yeah, humor breaks the ice.

Kathleen McInnis: Yeah. Well, Gayle, thank you so much for joining us today on Smart Women, Smart Power. For those joining us on the online audience, there's plenty of content on all the issues that are facing the nation today and the international security environment [on csis.org]. So have a poke around, take a look, see what's there, and have a wonderful afternoon.

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