Ex-Clinton Aide Sees Bright Future for Women

BY NINA BURLEIGH 10/5/15 AT 6:33 AM

Amid the daily stories about atrocities against women in distant wars and political attacks on Planned Parenthood at home, it is easy to miss the better news that Melanne Verveer, director of Georgetown University's Institute for Women, Peace and Security, and Kim Azzarelli, co-founder and chairwoman of Cornell Law School's Avon Global Center for Women and Justice, pack into their book, *Fast Forward: How Women Can Achieve Power and Purpose*, being published this week.

According to them, women have never been more powerful at home or globally, and we are at an “inflection point” where that progress is beginning to gain pace exponentially. Verveer served as Hillary Clinton’s chief of staff in the White House, and went to the State Department as one of her top aides, assigned the role of ambassador at large for global women’s issues. She talked to *Newsweek* about her book, Clinton, and those emails.

**Why are you so optimistic about women’s advancement?**

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I and my co-author really believe we are at a moment when we have more women like ourselves in positions of responsibility than ever, and like no time in the past, we have a research and data base proving that women are absolutely crucial to creating jobs, growing economies and to social progress. We have technological breakthroughs that make it easier for us to connect.

**As ambassador at large for global women’s issues, were you ever able to persuade any world leaders to change the status of women in their countries?**

Look, men are the vast majority of decision-makers. They are—not all—skeptical of what some of this is. Certainly women’s rights are fundamental. But you can’t persuade skeptics on that basis alone. Oftentimes, they say, “Oh, very nice, do a program,” whether in government or a
company, but it’s not persuasive unless in terms of their bottom line. In Japan, [Prime Minister Shinzo] Abe’s economic reform package is based on a paper called “Womenomics.”

You wrote: “We’ve seen over and over that as women seize… leadership positions…they amplify their impact by working together to advance women and girls.” But is that really the norm? There are women, Carly Fiorina is one, who insist there is no glass ceiling at all.

I don’t think women are a monolithic force; clearly we come in all different packages and have a variety of experience. But from my experience, there is this strong sense, and it involves women from across the political spectrum, that we can make a difference.

Secretary Clinton co-founded the Women in Public Service Project in 2011 with the Seven Sisters colleges, aiming to get 50 percent female representation by 2050 at all levels of government. Both parties have programs to increase female participation but Democrats do a better job. Why is that?

I don’t know, except I do know that women’s political participation is the place where we have made the least progress globally. It’s been extremely difficult for women for a variety of reasons. But there are real efforts in places like Latin America. Much of it happens where there are set-asides, affirmative steps, quotas. The parties are the gateway in parliamentary systems. So there is some progress. As for the Republicans, I don’t know. You probably know better.

Does it really make a difference whether women are in office or not?

Well in our Congress, Democratic and Republican women came across the aisle and said, “Enough of this, let’s end this kind of inability to move ahead and do our job.” Look at Title IX, the Violence against Women Act, breast cancer issues—these were all issues that Democratic and Republican women came together on and persuaded their male colleagues to support.

You spend a lot of time in the book talking about multinationals and philanthropists launching programs for women abroad. What about at home?

Well, take Walmart. There have obviously been issues with Walmart, but they have taken some positive proactive steps. Their big women’s economic empowerment initiative helps women enormously. They have made a commitment in 2011 to source $20 billion from women-owned
business in the next five years. They are in writing to meet that goal. Second, they are telling their vendors they want to see more women involved. Change is happening. Let's face it: This is not for the most part philanthropy. Businesses today recognize that it is in their business interest to invest in women.

Women’s advocates have tried to persuade the U.N. to include rape among the binding conventions outlawed in war, like torture and chemical and biological weapons. You worked in those circles at State. Why hasn’t rape become part of the U.N. Convention?

It’s a good question! Largely, the world of decision-makers in this space somehow see sexual violence as normal, as in: It’s wars, it’s gone on forever. Today, this violence is institutionalized and a strategic decision in warfare of the perpetrators of warfare. It’s a successful tool. Few of the perpetrators have been brought to justice. I met a Bosnian woman who told me that her rapist is now the policeman on the corner. There’s a hell of a lot of work that has to be done.

One of the “intractable and salient problems” you say women face in the U.S. and abroad 20 years after the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing is the fact that the responsibility for care falls primarily to women. Your former State Department colleague Anne Marie Slaughter has been writing a lot on this topic. How did you, a mother of three, handle the work and family issue? Will it ever fade away, do you think?

Well it is very, very difficult. In this country today it’s more the norm for women to be working outside the home than not, and if we really care about children in the next generation we ought to help parents be both good parents and good employees. They ought not to be in conflict. We need to wake up, as Anne Marie has said, and not only understand that this requires men to be part of the solution, but requires all of us to join together to ensure that children are getting protection and child care that is acceptable and affordable. It’s very hard for single parents. For example, why does school close at 3 o’clock? Why can’t kids sit there for two more hours and do something creative in after-school, until their parents can pick them up? There is a lot that we can do.

Hillary Clinton wrote in the forward to your book that for two decades, “Melanne has been that true friend to me.” Can you talk about what that friendship has meant for you? Was she your mentor or were you hers?
It was a friendship that grew out of mutual interests. I knew President Clinton before I knew her. We were interested in similar issues. I asked her to be involved in how to enhance young people’s civic participation. Fast-forward to her husband coming to the White House. She asked me to join the staff. I owe her an enormous debt of gratitude. It was there that I began to learn, as she was learning, the magnitude of these issues, especially at Beijing [in 1995]. The reaction in this enormous room as she said women’s rights are human rights: You could see what it meant to have a powerful person, from the most powerful nation in the world, saying these things. You realize you can make a difference.

**Clinton has used her stature to talk about women’s advancement globally. Would she continue to do that as president, and how?**

I have no doubt about that, and one reason I say that with such assurance is that I’ve seen it in everything she did. In the Senate she rarely traveled outside the U.S. But when she went to Afghanistan or Iraq, she would always ask to meet with women: “Please put together a meeting with the women.” And at the State Department, she did not hesitate to say these are issues that matter to our foreign policy. She has always said: Where women are denied rights, it goes hand in hand with conflict and extremism.

**You are on some of those State emails, now under scrutiny. What do you make of “emailgate”?**

It’s unfortunate. And clearly she should have used the State Department server instead of a private service. She has admitted that herself. But I think the conclusion that some are trying to make—in terms of her purposely leaking classified information, and the worst scenarios around this—are totally unsubstantiated. I know this person, I’ve worked with her for two decades. She is a woman of integrity. She’s not somebody who is going to engage in anything that is going to bring harm to the United States. Hopefully the real issues will get more traction, in terms of the challenges this country confronts in the world and at home.