

Center for Strategic and International Studies

TRANSCRIPT

Online Event

“Gender Equality and Sustainability Challenges: A Conversation with the Honorable Michèle Flournoy”

DATE

Monday, March 7, 2022 at 10:00 a.m. ET

FEATURING

Michèle Flournoy

Former Under Secretary of Defense for Policy

Candida Wolff

Executive Vice President and Head of Global Government Affairs, Citi

CSIS EXPERTS

Suzanne Spaulding

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Nina Easton: Hi and welcome all to our day-early celebration of International Women's Day. I'm Nina Easton. I'm co-founder of Smart Women, Smart Power. I'm also co-CEO of SellersEaston Media, which is a multimedia firm focused on stories of leadership and impact.

We founded Smart Women, Smart Power seven years ago, believe it or not, to amplify the voices of women leaders in global security and foreign affairs. And since then our stage has showcased incredibly impactful women: luminaries like Melinda Gates and Christine Lagarde, senators, members of Congress, ambassadors, scientists, and even astronauts. The impact, especially on women who are pursuing careers in global security and international affairs, has been pretty profound.

I mean, I remember myself moderating an event at the U.S. Naval Academy. And I was surrounded by these young, female midshipmen who said that the Smart Women, Smart Power podcast had motivated, inspired, and informed them. And here at CSIS, when we hold live events we, of course, have those high-level professionals here, but we also have a lot of women – diverse women who are pursuing their own paths – carving their own paths to make impact as great leaders.

Many of you will notice that Beverly Kirk is absent. That's because she's actually working with me. We are – we have founded an innovative and exciting new program called JOURNEY. And Bev is the executive director of that nonprofit. We have a pretty ambitious goal, which is to change the trajectory and diversity of women at the top. We're kind of excited because tomorrow, International Women's Day, marks the deadline for our first cohort of applicants for our fellowship program. But never worry, Bev is not straying far from these halls, she's still a senior associate at CSIS.

Today our guest of honor is going to be interviewed by Suzanne Spaulding. And I want to thank Suzanne and Seth Jones for guiding Smart Women, Smart Power in 2022, which we can – when we can have live events again, it's going to be very exciting. And Suzanne has a truly extraordinary career herself. She is – she's the homeland security senior advisor here at CSIS, and she's the director of the Defending Democratic Institutions Program here, which obviously is very timely and important right now. Suzanne has served in a range of administrations. She was undersecretary of DHS, where she led an agency that's now called the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency. She's worked for the CIA. She's held high positions on Capitol Hill. And in addition to her CSIS duties, she is now – she serves on the Cyberspace Solarium Commission and is a member of the Homeland Security Experts Group. So I want to thank Suzanne.

I also want to thank, once again, Citi, and turn this over to Candi Wolff, who is the head of Global Government Affairs at Citi. Again, could never have built this program without Citi. So thank you so much, Candi.

Candida Wolff: Thank you, Nina. And thank you for joining all of us this morning as we celebrate International Women's Day with the first event in the Smart Women, Smart Power Series for 2022. I'd first like to start, though, by acknowledging the horrifying situation unfolding in Ukraine. Citi has more than 200 employees in Ukraine, and our thoughts are with them and all of those who are in harm's way as this attack continues.

Citi has been supporting Smart Women, Smart Power for the last seven years, as Nina said, to bring together women leaders in foreign policy and national security and the business community to convene a dialogue on the most pressing issues facing our world. So, on behalf of Citi and the more than hundred thousand women in our global workforce, Happy International Women's Day to all of you.

At Citi, we're proud to call ourselves a leading global bank, as we are present in more than a hundred countries. This often means that a geopolitical event such as the one unfolding at the moment we find ourselves in the midst of. Our global footprint gives us a unique view on the challenges and opportunities that exist in various political climates around the world.

Today's guest is no stranger to many of those same climates. We're very fortunate to have with us the Honorable Michèle Flournoy to join us to discuss gender equality and sustainability, as well as world events, topics that are priorities for Citi.

I'm looking forward to hearing from Michèle and her perspective, and so I'll pass it to Suzanne to get us started. Thank you, again, for joining us.

Suzanne Spaulding: Thank you so much, Candi, and thank you to Citi for your support of Smart Women, Smart Power, and thank you, Nina, for your prescience in starting this wonderful program along with Andrew Schwartz, and, of course, our beloved Beverly Kirk, who you've stolen from us but to a wonderful opportunity. And I want to thank Alexis Day, who continues to support the Smart Women, Smart Power program here at CSIS so ably.

But mostly, Michèle, I want to thank you for taking time out of what I know is a crazy schedule always but, particularly, these days to come and have a conversation with us as our celebration of International Women's Day.

And I'm going to – we're going to talk about the theme of International Women's Day. We're going to talk a little bit about your career and being such an impressive role model for women in national security.

But I want to start, first, with the issue that is so much on the forefront of our minds today and that, of course, is the horror that is unfolding in Ukraine. And I – you know, hard for anyone to know where this goes but, you know, you are in as good a position as anyone to analyze what's happening and what are the options. What do you think is the – are some of, perhaps, the most likely directions in which we should expect this to unfold?

Michèle
Flournoy:

Well, Suzanne, first of all, thank you for inviting me. It's great to be here as part of this program and to commemorate and celebrate International Women's Day.

I think, unfortunately, the situation in Ukraine is going to get worse before it gets better, although we were, certainly, surprised by some of the logistical and morale problems that the Russian forces have had. They have not performed as well as one would have expected and we've, certainly, been surprised by the incredible resilience and commitment of an outgunned Ukrainian force and population.

You know, even given those surprises, I do think that the Russian forces will lay siege to a number of Ukrainian cities and eventually surround Kyiv with the purpose of trying to topple the government. I think, given their direct targeting of civilians against international law, we're going to see the death toll climb.

But I don't think the Russian forces have enough to sustain any kind of success they may have in Ukraine but I also don't think the Ukrainians have what they need to fully be – repel the Russian forces.

So I think this is going to be a very tragic and costly months-long struggle. It may transition to more of an insurgency type of model. Our assistance to the Ukrainians – U.S. and NATO – will be critical in that period. But I think the most likely outcome, at some point, the – Putin comes to the negotiating table and wants an off ramp.

I do think that this will be incredibly costly to the Russian economy. The solidarity of the Europeans with us on sanctions, the willingness to go after things like the central bank, like SWIFT – now we're talking about energy – this has surprised everyone – (laughs) – and that solidarity among the democracies of the transatlantic community is very powerful.

And I think it's – I think, at the end of the day, history will look back at this as a tremendous blunder by Putin, but it's also going to be very costly not only to Putin but to the Ukrainian people.

Ms. Spaulding: Yeah. It's heartbreaking, but there are also, obviously, really inspiring moments that we're seeing here, one of which you alluded to which is the unity and the determination and response, first and foremost, of course, of the Ukrainian people, the Ukrainian government, the courage of individuals in Russia standing up and protesting this war, and of course, the democracies coming together – really nations all over the world coming together to make it clear. And, you know, you and so many others have talked for years about making – the importance of playing to our strengths as a democracy, right? There are those who sometimes seem to have authoritarian or totalitarian envy with how easily those kinds of regimes can move or make decisions or crack down on things, but democracy has tremendous strengths and we're seeing it today, right, with having real allies versus client states who are coerced, and the transparency that democracies are used to living in that has served us well, I think, in pre-bunking pretexts for war and getting word out that strengthens the resolve of populations and therefore of governments to come together. Do you see this as some of these things that we've talked about over the years about playing to the strengths of democracies really being exercised and implemented in this case?

Ms. Flournoy: Absolutely, and you mentioned the pre-bunking or debunking. You know, I think this administration has really set a new bar in terms of how to use intelligence, rapidly declassify it, put out the truth, the facts in order to deny an adversary like Putin, you know, the ability to misuse or to manufacture information and untruths as a sort of basis for some kind of manufactured provocation that, you know, we've been able to take that narrative away from him internationally. Now, he's, you know, shut down all of the media in Russia to just the state-owned outlets so he's been able to control the narrative pretty well in Russia, but everybody else has no – there's no, you know, mystery about what's really going on here, so I think that's been a success. And then I think, you know, it's been remarkable to see hundreds of thousands of people this weekend protest across Europe, protesting the Russian invasion of Ukraine, democracies really speaking up for democracy and freedom, countries like Germany flipping to cut off Nord Stream 2, to being willing to invoke the sanctions with regard to SWIFT, to send arms to Ukraine for the first time in German history. I mean, it's really been quite remarkable but I think our European friends have really been awakened to the very real threat that Russia poses to democracy in Europe.

Ms. Spaulding: Yeah, my sense is that populations in the United States and around the world are – they're clearly responding to the humanitarian crisis here and responding out of compassion, but I have a sense that they are also responding out of a fundamental sense that this is wrong, that for a country

to invade a neighbor country to take it over is – and so even though they don't know the term rules-based order that we talk about in Washington, they have internalized a sense of that and are responding in some ways to that.

Ms. Flournoy: Yeah. And I think people feel like this – you know, we had Europe whole and free and at peace. You know, this is like – this shouldn't be happening in the 21st century, especially not only the aggression itself but the approach of these siege – I mean, we're back in the Middle Ages where Putin is trying to starve and freeze and, you know, target civilians to break the will of a democratic free people. It just – it's chilling and it really – we need that very powerful, united response.

Ms. Spaulding: So the humanitarian crisis is huge and growing and one of the things I really want to talk with you about, Michèle, is the work you've been doing since you got out of government with nongovernmental organizations like CARE. And maybe you can talk with us a little bit about what you see these humanitarian organizations, civil society doing to respond to the humanitarian crisis there.

Ms. Flournoy: Well, I'll just speak to CARE as an example of international NGOs. You know, so CARE has long been focused on women and girls in development and also in humanitarian crises, so when something like Ukraine pops up, we immediately started a \$20 million campaign; within a couple of days we were halfway to that goal. We're using our global networks to get humanitarian assistance to those in need. But what really drew me to care was the focus on women and girls and the focus on measuring impact. I have never seen any other NGO that is more disciplined and analytic in terms of really saying: Are we having lasting impact, and being able to quantify, you know, the – you know, the outcomes that we're going after. And the focus on women and girls is really based on a premise, which is, I think, now proven again and again in multiple studies, that when you empower women and girls, when you lift them up in development efforts to actually accelerate and scale much more quickly the lifting up of the whole population of which they're a part.

When girls go to school, when, you know, women become breadwinners, when they do village savings and loan organizations, they don't, you know, go gamble the money away on a Friday or drink it away in the bar. They pay – they take the money they've got, they put it into their children's education, they put it into their businesses, they put it into loans to others in the community. And so it's really a powerful, powerful way to scale and accelerate your outcomes.

Ms. Spaulding: Yeah, terrific. Well, we're going to come back to that, but first I want to talk about your recent trip last week to Taiwan.

Ms. Flourney: Yes.

Ms. Spaulding: President Biden asked you and several others to travel to Taiwan. Tell us a little bit about that trip, what was it about, and whatever you can share with us in terms of outcomes.

Ms. Flourney: Sure. So in the midst of the Ukraine crisis, you know, China has been rattling the saber even more vis-à-vis Taiwan. And I think this administration was right to want to reach out and reassure the Taiwanese people and the Taiwanese authorities that we are –you know, even though we’re, obviously, preoccupied with Europe, we are thinking about you, we are committed to supporting your ability to develop your own defense capacity, we’re committed to you as a democracy and as a very important economic and technological partner in the Indo-Pacific. And so we went out to meet with the members of the administration and convey that message. And it was very, very timely.

There’s a lot of discussion about, you know, the parallels or lack of parallels between Ukraine and Taiwan in Taiwan. And so much so that, as you know, Taiwan is one of the main manufacturers of masks. While they were there, they handed out the Stand with Ukraine – (laughs) – masks that we could all wear.

Ms. Spaulding: Love it. I love it.

Ms. Flourney: But I think, you know, one of the most important things that needs to happen in this crisis is that China needs to learn the right lessons, which is not that you can just walk in and invade a thriving democracy and get away with it, but that you will experience tremendous costs. My hope is that what happens to Russia in the mid to long term as a result of this action will be a very sobering lesson for Xi Jinping when he thinks about the future of Taiwan after the 20th party congress this year.

Ms. Spaulding: Yeah. I can’t help but think that Xi Jinping must be very unhappy with Putin at this stage. Not only for just for generally complicating his life in terms of China walking the line here in their response, but also I do think that if China did move into Taiwan at this point, go against Taiwan, that it would be compared very much so to Ukraine, in a way that if this hadn’t happened Xi Jinping may have been able to muddy that narrative bit more.

Ms. Flourney: Right, yeah. And I do think, you know, this is more – the China-Russia relationship, you know, I think we have to be careful that it doesn’t become a more strategic alliance, but at this point I really do think of it more as a marriage of convenience. But I think if Putin continues to misjudge or goes too far, I think there will be a point where Xi wants to distance himself. We’re

not seeing that yet. I think right now he's doubling down on trying to soften some of the economic impacts that Putin will experience from the sanctions.

But longer-term, I think – I hope that what will eventually happen to the Russian economy and to Putin's, you know, power, if you will, or his – I think he's going to make himself an international pariah for the remainder of his days. And I don't think that's something that Xi is interested in becoming.

Ms. Spaulding: Yeah. So you made a few references to the targeting – Putin's targeting of civilians, being this international pariah. The U.N. has talked about opening investigation of war crimes. Does that complicate efforts to find an off-ramp or a negotiated –

Ms. Flournoy: You know, I think we – I mean, I would hope that the administration is thinking about timing and sequencing. I mean, clearly, there's no question that civilians are being directly targeting – targeted, and that is a war crime.

But in terms of pursuing it, you want to make sure that you sequence this so that you have an opportunity to still sit down with Putin to end this by negotiation if that's possible. Again, I don't think this is coming in the coming weeks. I think this is months away, sadly. But at some – he's not going to be able to achieve his goals here, and at some point he's going to have to, you know, find a face-saving – try to find some kind of way off the ledge.

Ms. Spaulding: Yeah. Well, it's a fascinating time to have an opportunity to get your insights on this.

But I do want to shift gears. We are here to celebrate International Women's Day. And in getting ready for this, I did a little research on International Women's Day and I – and I thought this was just interesting and relevant. The date for International Women's Day wasn't formalized until a wartime strike in 1917 when Russian women demanded bread and peace. Four days into the strike, the czar was forced to abdicate and the provisional government granted women the right to vote. And that is the date that we now celebrate.

Ms. Flournoy: I didn't know that.

Ms. Spaulding: I didn't know that either.

Ms. Flournoy: That's a wonderful piece of history.

Ms. Spaulding: Right. So there – and there are actually a couple different themes for International Women's Day. The International Women's Day website is promoting the theme hashtag #BreakTheBias and is encouraging people to imagine a world free of bias, stereotypes, and discrimination. But the United

Nations is celebrating the theme of gender equality today for a sustainable tomorrow. And I know this is, Michèle, this is an issue that you have thought a lot about and written a lot about and worked on. It's, obviously, relevant to the work that you're doing with CARE and other organizations, and something that you thought about when you were at the Defense Department.

The role of – so let's start with sort of the security element of climate change and its disparate impact on women and girls around the world.

Ms. Flournoy: So, you know, I think that as climate change occurs, you're going to – we are, obviously, seeing more frequent and more severe weather events, natural disasters, and so forth. I think over time some of the impacts with regard to availability of water, arable land, sea level rise, we're actually going to see – start to see climate-induced migrations, large-scale population movements, and/or potentially greater conflicts over increasingly scarce resources like water and arable land.

And so that – I mean, those are security issues. It has implications for the U.S. military mission in terms of humanitarian assistance and disaster relief and support to civilian authorities on that. It has implications in terms of the types of conflicts that we may see that touch on our interests or those of our allies in the future. But it also has direct impacts for the DOD in terms of think of all the coastal facilities that we have. The Navy's already done a study that shows that many of its facilities will be underwater if the worst outcome, you know, happens. And so these are very real impacts in security terms.

It also often disproportionately impacts women, because when there is a crisis, when there's a pinch, the first children pulled out of school are girls. The first people who are pushed back into poverty are women. And so they are the most vulnerable of the most vulnerable, and so it does have a disproportionate impact.

Ms. Spaulding: Yeah. And they are often the ones, almost always the ones around the world responsible for finding water in places where water is scarce.

Ms. Flournoy: Yes. Yeah.

Ms. Spaulding: The farther they have to go, the greater security risks. I mean, very practical, right, as you know.

Ms. Flournoy: Right, right.

Ms. Spaulding: Tangible kinds of things. And I know that NGOs have been very involved in trying to address that, and we'll talk about that in a minute.

But talking about DOD, DOD has now come out with a couple of documents in which they recognize climate change as a national security issue and the direct relevance to DOD that you talked a bit about. But you also have written about the ways in which DOD could be more – could think about this more broadly in terms of the tools it can bring to bear to help address climate change, including things we talk about in other contexts: use of its purchasing power, right, to insist on greener technologies; its construction all over the world and in the United States. Maybe talk a little bit about some of those broader.

Ms. Flournoy: Sure.

Ms. Spaulding: Yeah.

Ms. Flournoy: So DOD has actually long recognized the impact on mission, the impact on facilities, the impact on – potentially on operational readiness, but I think the opportunity that's – I think this administration is putting forward is, you know, DOD is the largest real estate holder in the United States. It owns one of the largest civilian fleet of cars, black SUVs and sedans and so forth. And if DOD – DOD is of such a – and, plus, its research-and-development budget is quite substantial. And so if DOD were to, you know, shift in a direction of hybrid or electric vehicles, for example – if we decide, and I think the administration is moving in this direction, that as we replace those fleets they have to be electric or hybrid – that's a demand signal to U.S. auto industry that is going to move the needle substantially. They know – it means they know that there's a certain amount of demand that's going to be there. They can accelerate their transition to more and more of their production being electric and hybrid vehicles. So that's what I meant by market maker. And I think DOD could be very helpful in that regard.

Similarly, with regard to real estate and construction, you know, this could be a great quality-of-life issue, frankly, for military families around the country to – you know, to have more energy-efficient homes that reduce their costs, to have more clean, you know, environmentally-sound construction. So there's real opportunity here as DOD replaces or rebuilds its housing stock or builds new housing stock.

Ms. Spaulding: Yeah. Yeah. You know, folks sometimes complain about how huge the Defense Department budget is. We can turn that huge purchasing power into something that could drive us in the right direction.

Ms. Flournoy: Yeah. I will say, though, this is controversial. I mean, I think when you go up on Capitol Hill you have a lot of support for anything that's mission-oriented, anything that has to do with operational readiness. For example, there are lots of interesting pilot programs with regard to deployable off-grid energy

systems so that – to reduce the supply chains and the fuel supply required for, you know, expeditionary operations. That kind of thing Congress will support. When you start talking about DOD as a market maker, there are some, particularly on the Republican side, who will defect and say, no, that's not the department's job and I'm not going to give you – so I think this'll be an interesting debate that will be coming up, particularly in the '23 budget, to say, you know, how broad of an agenda will Congress support.

Ms. Spaulding: Yeah. And I'm sure some of it will be balancing those broader objectives against any impact on mission readiness, on cost, et cetera.

Ms. Flournoy: Yeah. Yeah. Absolutely, yeah.

Ms. Spaulding: Yeah. Yeah.

So the other way that you have been involved in trying to address these concerns about sustainability, obviously, is through these nongovernmental organizations. Talk a little bit about both the direct work in, for example, water resources in communities around the world and – but also the work to just empower women and girls who can be such powerful voices –

Ms. Flournoy: Right.

Ms. Spaulding: – and have been such powerful voices advocating for changed behaviors and policies to address climate change.

Ms. Flournoy: Yeah. So I think, you know, CARE has a presence in over 90 countries around the world, and with the advent of accelerated climate change they've sort of built into, you know, their – the programs they already have – whether it's, you know, clean water and sanitation, sustainable agriculture, education for women and girls, savings and loans for women's communities – they've kind of built in climate as a – not as a separate thing, but as an integrated thread into everything they're doing. And it's really focused on community resilience, trying to anticipate – trying to get ahead of what is coming 10 years, 20 years for some of these communities and making the investments year by year by year so that if and when the change does happen they can be more resilient and survive it – survive it better.

But on this issue of empowering women's voices, I just want to tell you one story of when I was – I traveled with CARE before COVID to visit a lot of their projects, and we met one woman who had started with CARE, you know, 20 years prior. She had – she had lived in a – you know, a basic hut. She had to ask her husband for permission to leave the home. She got him to let her go to a CARE meeting. And she started – she's a – you know, a subsistence farmer at that point. And through CARE's training, not only did they improve the yield of their crops, but she also moved into manufacturing of fertilizer –

organic fertilizers. And fast forward 20 years later, she had run for city – you know, for her village council. She was now running for political office in her state. And when she very proudly says, and guess where my two adult boys go to school? And I said, where do they go to school? You know, I was thinking maybe the capital. She said, university in the United States of America.

You know, so in one generation when you invest in the education and empowerment and enabling of women, with real tools to lift not only themselves and their families and their villages, you can have extraordinary progress. And I can assure you that family and that village's future is forever changed, just from that consistent work over time. So that's the model. It's not just one and done. It's really staying with people on a journey over time to build the resilience of whole communities.

Ms. Spaulding: Yeah. It's a powerful story, Michèle. A really inspiring story. And I remember, I had the fortune of going to Ethiopia in 2010 with some dear friends who were involve with efforts to bring water wells and other resources, but also to educate girls, to find incentives for families to send girls to school and keep them in school. And I remember visiting some of the villages. And consistently there was a water committee that had been established, because of course these wells need to be sustained, they need to be maintained, et cetera. Rules need to be developed. And in every case, the head of the water committee was a woman.

Ms. Flournoy: Hmm, interesting.

Ms. Spaulding: Very impressive. Yeah.

Ms. Flournoy: Yeah.

Ms. Spaulding: Yeah. But you talk about the need for long-term investment, right? That's not one and done. Really important message. And it's a similar message to the one you bring to the discussion about diversity, equity, and inclusion in our workforce, right? And particularly in the national security workforce where you, as I said, have been such a tremendous inspiration and powerful voice in the national security world, lending tremendous credibility to the voice of all women in national security, as a result of your outstanding contributions. And but I know that, you know, this is a theme for you in this context as well.

Ms. Flournoy: Mmm hmm. This is – when I'm not in government, this is where I focus my attention. And I get tremendous joy out of doing it. But, you know, ensuring that we have women and people of color fully represented in our national security cadre is not just a moral issue, it's not just because it's the right thing to do. You know, if you want a healthy democracy, you want a national security cadre that looks like America. And now there's all this business

literature that says, you know, the more the diverse – the more diverse a leadership team, the more diverse a board of directors, the better the performance of the actual company. So we have evidence that more diversity brings better decision making and better organizational performance.

And then if you – then the logical, you know, sort of the duh – (laughs) – factor is, why would you leave half the population out of your talent pool, right? So the challenge is how do you actually do it? And I think that we've had a lot of focus on bringing younger women in. We have a lot more work to do in bringing younger people of color in. But that's not enough. I was – had the privilege of working on advising a study that John Brennan did at the CIA when he was director on diversity, because they would, you know, recruit almost a perfectly representative incoming class every year. But fast-forward 15 years, and women were only less than a quarter of those who were being considered for promotion to senior intelligence service.

And his question is, what is happening? Why are they leaving? What's happening to women? Is that they're being – is there bias in the promotion? Is it that they're leaving because the career is not sustainable? Like, what is happening? And what he did was a soup-to-nuts analysis of every step along the way, what are the biases, what are the barriers, where are failing to support? And then he went after it with a very comprehensive approach. And that's the kind of thing we need to do. It needs to be done at every single level, because it takes 30 years to grow a Suzanne Spaulding, or a Kathleen Hicks, who's now the – you know, a CSIS alum, and the most senior woman ever in the Department of Defense; or a Christine Wormuth, also a CSIS alum. You know, it just takes time, and it's not just hiring them, you know, as an intern way back when. It's cultivating at every step and making sure that those barriers and those unfair biases are removed.

Yeah, it's such an important point, because I think we have gotten smarter as a society, as you say, about the value of diversity, of a diverse workforce, going back to the discussion about climate and its disparate impact on women, disparate impact on communities of color in many countries, and bringing those voices to the table helps us to have better insights into some of those in both the impact and ways to mitigate. But we've gotten smarter, more slowly, also about inclusion –

Ms. Spaulding: (Laughs.) Yeah.

– right, that just simply having those good numbers of folks entering into the workforce is not enough. And, certainly, when I was at DHS leading the wonderful men and women there, professionals in cybersecurity and critical infrastructure security and resilience, cybersecurity, particularly, was a – is a context in which, you know, it's not been a comfortable workplace, traditionally, for women.

Ms. Flournoy: It's a leadership and culture issue, and I – when I look at the persistence of the problem of sexual assaults and harassment in the military, it is a leadership and command climate and culture issue, and that is absolutely something that you have to go after aggressively.

I mean, I applaud the recent changes in the law because I think that's going to help, but, ultimately, it's a leadership accountability question. And it was – actually, it was – my son graduated from one of the service academies a couple years ago and the then secretary of defense was coming out to speak, and the one line of the entire speech where he had a standing ovation from all the parents in the stadium was when he said, you are the next leaders going into the fleet and this is going to stop with you. You know, this is your responsibility to create a command climate where this does not happen – this is not tolerated. And the whole stadium of mostly parents – (laughs) – stood up and applauded.

But I really do think it has to come down to that leader accountability, ultimately, if we're really going to deal with this effectively.

Ms. Spaulding: Yeah. I think that's absolutely right. But your previous point about your conversation with John Brennan and the work that he did is also important, which is to gather the data to figure out what are – and it may vary from context to context – what are the key barriers – what are the key problems here. And I hope that the information that Brennan and the agency developed in that context is being shared with others in government because we all need to share those lessons learned and those best practices.

And then there's – you know, there's – the burden, ultimately, at the end of the day, also then falls on the individual, right, to figure out how to navigate this and how to rise up and make their voice heard. And so, of course, would love to hear what advice you would have for the young women who are contemplating a career in national security, women entering national security, women in mid-career or, you know, bumping up trying to get to those most senior levels.

Ms. Flournoy: Yeah. Well, first of all, come on in. The water's fine. (Laughs.) We need you.

Ms. Spaulding: That's great.

Ms. Flournoy: Second is choose the boss, not the job. So, in my experience, the job description was much less important than finding a boss and a team that valued and really walked the walk of mentorship – you know, a boss, a team, that was going to invest in your professional development, that was going to give you opportunities to take on more and more responsibilities and to really grow as you, you know, are in a particular position.

And the other thing I would say is, you know, everybody says play to your strengths, and I agree with that at some level because we tend to enjoy what we're best at the most. But I also think it's worth doing an honest self-assessment periodically to sort of say, where am I struggling, and to go after those weaknesses if they are likely to become a barrier to your success.

So, for me, when I was here at CSIS I was terrified of public speaking. I mean, doing what we're doing now would have given me sweaty palms. It would be the worst thing in the world that I could imagine being forced to do. And I had a mentor here who said: This is a problem. You can't just be a great writer and analyst; you've got to get comfortable communicating, and he kind of developed a little program for me to work – you know, develop confidence in speaking and sort of find my comfort zone there. So go after your weaknesses, not just playing to your strengths.

Ms. Spaulding: Yeah. Great advice. I think that's terrific. And it is – it falls on those of us that are now – you know, as I said the other day, for me, anyway, nearing closer to the end of my career than the beginning of my career, to make sure that we provide those opportunities –

Ms. Flournoy: Absolutely.

Ms. Spaulding: – for women and girls coming up through – particularly speaking opportunities. I have the great privilege of being on the board of Girl Security, which is a wonderful organization. I know you're familiar with them. They go into high schools and talk to high school girls about concepts of national security and the importance – they've learned the importance of picking these girls up where they are, many of whom have never thought about national security, but they have concepts of their own personal security and interesting relationships with government oftentimes where there's, you know, kind of a mistrust. And so picking them up where they are, using a trauma-formed approach to this, and then bringing them along into a better understanding of concepts of national security, both to help diversify the pipeline but also just to ensure that women and girls are more comfortable being informed and engaged citizens weighing in, having views on national security issues, which I think is so important, and I know that you do a lot of that kind of work as well.

So we do have a few questions from the audience, one of them – Miriam asked if you could talk about gender inequality in the Middle East and whether you have any thoughts or recommendations on how to alleviate some of those issues. How should we proceed, how should they proceed, et cetera?

Ms. Flourney: Well, it is a serious problem. You know, you have, in many cases, traditional cultures that do not see women and men as equal and have not offered them equal opportunity, you know, forever, and so I do think you have to make a case for, you know, that the inclusion of women, that the tapping in to the talent pool of women is essential to their economic development and their success as societies, and so starting with things like convincing not only the women but the men in the society to avoid child marriage, convincing them of the value of sending their girls to school and letting them finish school and actually compete for opportunities in higher education, convincing them of the value of leveraging women in a broader variety of professional fields, and so forth, and eventually to actually participating in the political process as well. I mean, these are – you know, every country, every society is in a different place and you have to sort of analyze it individually, but I think the pillars are there and where – there's plenty of evidence that where those steps are taken it benefits the whole society in terms of their development and modernization.

Ms. Spaulding: Great. So a question about – going back to the strengths of democracy that we talked about earlier. One of the things that I've been doing here with Devi Nair and the team here at CSIS is looking at adversary attacks on our democracy using information operations. And you were part of the very first meeting that I pulled together under the – with the support of Dr. Hamre, to look at adversary attacks on our democratic institutions way back in 2017, and then we did a deep dive on attacks specifically on our trust and confidence in our justice system as a way to undermine that key pillar of our democracy. And the recommendation that came out of those convenings that you were a part of and our subsequent deep dive and analysis included all the things that you might anticipate – working with the platforms, trying to deter the bad actors, et cetera, from these disinformation campaigns – but ultimately that one of the strongest ways we could counter disinformation and information operations is building public resilience against the content of that messaging, right? So if the intent – if the content is, democracy is broken, it is irrevocably broken, and the individual is powerless to do anything about it, and that there is more that divides you than unites you, right, how do you build resilience against that kind of messaging? We've turned to civics education, to reminder of the importance of democracy, that democracy is under attack, that it is not inevitable or invincible, but it is worth defending. And it is worth defending not because it's perfect, but because it is capable of change, if we are educated and empowered and persistent as agents of change. Do you –

Ms. Flourney: I am all for reinstating civics education. I can remember my own experience of that, you know? And it's very important that Americans understand and appreciate the fundamentals of what makes us so remarkable as a society and as a country. I do think that in addition to civics, something that in this age I would add is some education about how to tell

truth from falsehood on the internet. Actually my kids – they’re now, you know, college age and graduates – but when they were in high school the high school piloted an effort to try to help them figure out how do know what’s true on the internet? How do I become more of a skeptical consumer of what’s coming at me through social media and so forth? And it was really, I thought, very powerful. And I think that needs to be built on.

But I also think we need to create opportunities for people, young people in particular, to experience other Americans outside their stovepipe or community. And this is where I think expanding opportunities for national service comes in. I don’t mean just military service. I mean – you know, could be Teach For America, AmeriCorps, National Conservation Corps, National Public Health Corps. I don’t think we’ll ever get politically to the point where we make it mandatory or compulsory, but if we could dramatically expand the opportunities – every year we turn away thousands and thousands of young people from these opportunities.

And what happens when they – when they go to city, or they go to one of these – Teach for America, they find themselves with people they would never otherwise meet of their same age. You know, a city kid from, you know, a ghetto area is with a rural kid from a family farm who’s with a, you know, upper middle-class kid from Manhattan. And they’re all thrown together. And they start to feel – you know, they start to find more of their commonalities, more what makes – you know, brings them together than what separates them in terms of – and they learn from each other’s lived experience.

And so I think the more you can create programs like that, that throw young people together for an actual experience, not just an intellectual exercise but living together, working together, I think that can be very powerful to setting us up for a less polarized future.

Ms. Spaulding:

Yeah. I think that’s exactly right. So the civic virtues, right? A sense of civic responsibility. Why should I care about forwarding – why should I care about whether I forward false information or not, right? If we haven’t instilled a sense of civic responsibility, that you have a responsibility to that wider community, what you do has an impact beyond yourself, then it’s hard to get people to care about searching for the truth, right? Civic engagement as a way of reminding us of what we share, I think it’s so important not only for young people but for adults.

So we did a program over the last year and a half, civics as a national security imperative. And if it—if you agree that it is a national security imperative that we re-instill those democratic values, those civic virtues and skills – civic skills, then you – then you quickly realize that while the long-term investment in K-12 is good and important, we need to also work with our

adult population that has been ill-served by our education system not teaching civics in so many places around the country for decades.

Ms. Flournoy: Yeah, yeah. So another example that I'll mention – another NGO I'm involved with is The Mission Continues, which brings returning 9/11 veterans, people who have left the service, and helps them continue that sense of mission through service by pairing them with underserved communities. So you'll have, you know, a service platoon of veterans, young veterans, in L.A. And they'll make a multiyear partnership with the city of Watts. And they will transform parks, schools, Boys and Girls Clubs over time.

And in providing the core, the nucleus, of the effort, they'll also bring in all kinds of members of the community to be part of the community transforming itself. And it's a wonderful model to take these people who are just yearning for that continued sense of mission, and service and connection when they come home and marrying them up with communities that really are in great need and need that mobilization to address it.

Ms. Spaulding: That's wonderful. I love to hear that. And I do think that you're right in terms of the civic engagement, not just for young people who come together and then find out how much they actually have in common with people they might have thought they had nothing in common with. But I think, you know, among adults as well, if you spent the day picking up trash along the side of the highway next to somebody, right, at the end of the day you find out they voted for the other person, it's a little harder to totally demonize them.

Ms. Flournoy: Yeah, exactly.

Ms. Spaulding: And so it wasn't surprising to me to see the Commission on Public Service, national service, military service, ultimately include as its first recommendation the reinvigoration of civics education and the teaching of these civic skills and civic virtues, I do think that it's – and I am hopeful that a spark has been lit by the reaction to what's happening in Ukraine, that it will serve as a reminder to folks who had become somewhat cynical and despairing of democracies, as we talked about, that there is an important strength in democracies that we all need to come together and support and sustain.

We do – we have another question from the – from our audience, that I often get, and I'm sure you do also. It is: How do you overcome the imposter syndrome, right, when you're in these situations? How do you – that sense that you really don't – that everyone's going to find out you don't really belong here. And I always – I know for me I always say you never entirely overcome that.

Ms. Flournoy: Right. (Laughs.)

Ms. Spaulding: Sometimes that voice still rings in your head and you just plow through it. But what is your –

Ms. Flournoy: I guess I'd say a couple things.

First of all, as I've watched different kinds of leaders over the years, I think the best leaders are the people who don't have to be the smartest person in the room but who recognize that their value is bringing together the best experts, the best people who are smarter than they are in particular disciplines or areas, and inspiring and empowering and leading that team to get the most out of the team. And that reduces a lot of the burden, then, of, you know, I don't have to know the answer; I just have to be the person who's bringing together the right experts to learn from them, and listening and learning.

And then I think the second thing is finding your own authentic style. I mean, I remember, you know, when you're – the first time you're around the Situation Room table, you know, there's this – and there are lots of aggressive personalities who want to get the first word in, the constant word in, the last word in. And one of the things that was really wonderful for me to see is, you know, Bob Gates, very respected – he was kind of the elder statesman in the room oftentimes – he's a very reserved, private person. Oftentimes, he would not speak for a lot of the meeting but he would sort of reserve – he would listen, he'd coalesce, he'd synthesize, and he would always look to be the last speaker; to say, well, Mr. President, this is what I've heard, this is what I think the options are, this is what I would recommend. And he might have spoken less than anybody else in the meeting, but he – when he did speak, it's like that old commercial – when, you know, E.F. Hutton – this is all before most of your audience's memory. (Laughs.) But there –

Ms. Spaulding: Yeah, I remember this.

Ms. Flournoy: You know, everybody leans forward and listens, you know. It was that kind of reaction.

So I would say, you know, be authentic. Find your personal style. It may not be the most vocal or the loudest or whatever, but have confidence that when you have something to say, say it, because undoubtedly it'll be a different perspective and it will add value.

Ms. Spaulding: Yeah. Wonderful advice, Michèle. I wish I had had that advice earlier in my career as well. I think that's really terrific.

I also think it's important for – that women do sort of push themselves a bit beyond their comfort zone.

Ms. Flournoy: Yeah. Absolutely.

Ms. Spaulding: I have a wonderful sister who is an older sister who has been a great role model for me, and we have helped each other sort of do that as we've gone along, kind of push yourself a little bit out of your comfort zone.

Ms. Flournoy: That's good. If I could just make – give one example, in the CIA study one of the things we found is, you know, if you put out a job description with 10 requirements and, you know, a guy who had four or five would say I'm – that's good and I'm going to apply. I can – I can do this. A woman who had nine typically wouldn't apply; well, I'm not – I don't have the last requirement, so I really shouldn't apply. So this self-censorship, I have learned over the course of my career the best moves I've ever made professionally are when I've mustered the courage to take a risk and to lean into something that was slightly terrifying – (laughs) – in terms of the – you know, the Mount Everest of the learning curve. So take that risk.

Ms. Spaulding: Yeah. If it doesn't make you a little nervous, you're probably not pushing hard enough.

Ms. Flournoy: Yeah, exactly.

Ms. Spaulding: And I think they found the same with regard to op-eds. You know, I remember several years ago there was a big examination of why aren't there more women reflected on the opinion pages of major newspapers, and one of the things that those who manage those pages said is that they would call women – they would reach out to women and say could you write an op-ed on, you know, something that's happening in the news, and that the women, you know, nine times out of 10 would say, oh, you know, I'm not quite the world's greatest expert on that issue so maybe you should try someone else. Whereas, you know, a man who knew very little about the subject would say yes and do a little reading and write something.

Ms. Flournoy: (Laughs.)

Ms. Spaulding: So I think that's exactly right. And it does, you know, inevitably lead you to be nervous as you go forward. But it is the way we advance and make sure that our voices and our insights are contributing to the – to the world and to advancing policies and the position of women and girls around the world and climate change and all of the things that we care deeply about. So it's important to engage and be involved.

And, Michèle, you certainly have done that throughout your whole career with such tremendous competency and compassion. You have really set a great role model for me and for so many others.

Ms. Flournoy: And likewise.

Ms. Spaulding: And I thank you for that and for being with us today and sharing your terrific insights on such a broad range of issues. So thank you very much.

Ms. Flournoy: Thank you.

Ms. Spaulding: And for your support of Smart Women, Smart Power.

Ms. Flournoy: Great. Thank you so much.