

Tea with Madam Secretary, Part I

Written by Matthew A. Hill

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MATTHEW A. HILL, DEC 9 2011

This project examines the relationship between women and US foreign policy through examining women as makers and recipients of foreign policy, as well as examining how contemporary foreign policy is influenced by a gender agenda aimed at elevating women's rights to the platform of national interests. It does so, through interviews with four categories of people: Women involved in US foreign policy; People involved in promoting a gender concerned foreign policy; Women affected by US foreign policy; and experts that can talk about the different dimensions to this relationship between women and US foreign policy.

My most recent interview was with someone who could easily be counted in all four of these categories, but in different periods of her life. Madeleine Albright, the US foreign policy practitioner and policy-maker, the women's rights implementer in foreign policy during her time as a US Ambassador to the UN and as Secretary of State, the daughter of a Czechoslovak dissident who was a recipient of US support during WWII and the Cold War, and finally as the academic examining foreign policy.

What you get from interviewing the people that made important decisions or were directly impacted by these important decisions are first-hand accounts, it gives us details about personalities that help us understand and empathise. It creates a vertical link from the grower of foreign policy, to the worker that implements the foreign policy to the recipient of that policy. And at times the link between all three is more exigent when all three are talking about the same event. Think for example, of a woman that decides as Secretary of State to use military force and diplomacy to free Kosovars from Serbian aggression in 1999, of a woman that was involved in implementing democratising programmes for USAID in Kosovo, and then of a Kosovar woman who lived in Pristina and was a beneficiary of a USAID project to implement civil society building programmes.

So, I arrive two hours early for my interview. Experience has taught me that when you interview a busy person with a hectic schedule your time slot may not correspond to reality. Therefore, if you come early they may already be there twiddling their thumbs because their schedule has been changed due to someone higher up on the food chain having themselves been delayed due to other plans. It means that you will not lose your opportunity to get the interview. Now, in the case of the former US Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright, there was no one higher and so this did not really apply, but the point remains. Arriving early also gives one an opportunity to get comfy with the surroundings. The most unsatisfying interactions I have with people are when I, or the other, are harried because they are late; it takes a few minutes before the brain catches up with the body and one has fully arrived! It creates a bad juju and the opportunity for a satisfying synergy becomes evermore difficult.

Anyway, as I was saying, I am two hours early. Whilst the busy energised people are frenetically organising the other aspects to Albright's visit to the LSE, I sit in the 2nd floor room at LSE Ideas in a state of enforced Zen checking to make sure that the recording equipment is working, batteries, and replacement batteries, are fully charged and that I have the print-out of the questions.

As it turns out, she arrives 20 minutes late. And, after the formalities, our first interaction is quintessentially British, I say; 'would you like a cup of tea?' She says 'Yes', and she pours me a cuppa.

The principal difficulty in organising a project aimed at facilitating the research of other academics is to first

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determine what subject-fields to focus on, who are the academics, and find out what topics they are working on. Obviously, it is impossible to please everyone and it would be dangerous to do so. Asking only one question for those in a plethora of academic disciplines would lead towards superficial discussions with minimal scope for analysis. And with only an hour for each person it would leave no room for follow-ups. As a result, I decided to centre the questions on the following premise. Although essential and important, this project is not just about women's experiences either on having a career in this field or as a recipient of US foreign policy. It is so much more than that. This in itself would be in contrivance to the underlying, yet explicit aim of this project, which is to elevate the underrepresented voices of women in foreign policy as practitioners, commentators, policy-makers, academics and recipients.

We then sit down, facing each other across the table, and I am nervous. In order to attend to this premise outlined above, I explain how the project is aimed at recording people's thoughts and experiences on the multidimensional relationship between women and US foreign policy. And that the questions for you are centred on four themes: what got you interested in international relations and foreign policy, including questions on personal experiences of gender discrimination; issues involved with your foreign policy-related career; experiences and knowledge of US engagement with gender issues in foreign policy, and finally personal views on recent foreign policy related issues.

Tune in next week for part two!

About the author:

Matthew A. Hill is a senior lecturer in International Relations at Anglia Ruskin University. The aim of this blog is to examine US politics and pick an idea not fully-formed and run with it to see where it goes. Sometimes it will wither away but other times it will inspire to think about the idea further. Your input is encouraged and welcomed.