

SPOTLIGHT: Melanne Verveer

On April 6, 2009, Melanne S. Verveer was confirmed as the first U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for Global Women's Issues. Ambassador Verveer's swearing-in ceremony by Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton was on June 12, 2009, in the historic Benjamin Franklin Room at the State Department. It was attended by more than 400 people who were there to applaud this historic choice and celebrate the importance of this position, and most importantly, they were there to pay tribute to a woman with extraordinary talent and leadership skills.

The decision to create this position of Ambassador-At-Large for Global Women's Issues is unprecedented and reflects the elevated importance of these issues in the Obama administration at the same time it reflects the tireless advocacy and leadership of Verveer herself. In her capacity as director of the Department of State's new Office of Global Women's Issues, Verveer coordinates foreign policy issues and activities relating to the political, economic, and social advancement of women across the globe. In a job that is tailor-made for her, Verveer is charged with mobilizing concrete support for women's rights and political and economic empowerment through initiatives and programs to increase women and girls' access to education and health care, end violence against women and girls, and ensure that women's rights are fully integrated in the development of U.S. foreign policy. In this capacity, she travels across the globe advocating both for the inclusion of women's rights in foreign policy and also for the women themselves, telling their stories and highlighting their lives.

Verveer's career has spanned numerous sectors in Washington, D.C., and reflects the multifaceted nature of her advocacy both in Washington, D.C., and across the globe. Immediately prior to her appointment as ambassador-at-large, Verveer was chair and co-CEO of the Vital Voices Global Partnership, an international nonprofit organization she cofounded in June 2000. Vital Voices invests in women leaders across the globe and grew out of the U.S. government's successful *Vital Voices Democracy Initiative*, which was established in 1997 by then-First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton and former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright after the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing to promote the advancement of women as a U.S. foreign policy goal. Before her role at Vital Voices, Verveer served in the Clinton White House as chief of staff to First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton and was Mrs. Clinton's top aide on international issues to advance women's rights across the globe. She also led the effort to establish the president's Interagency Council on Women. Prior to her service in the White House, Verveer served in a variety of roles in public policy organizations and as a legislative staff person on Capitol Hill.

Verveer's leadership qualities can be summarized quite simply: She has the ability to get others willingly to follow her. In short, she embodies the qualities that make a leader. She has vision and values, with a clear picture of where to go and a firm grasp of what success looks like and how to achieve that success. She clearly communicates that vision to others with a style that brings people along and engages them in the cause. She has passion, strength of character, and tremendous integrity. She is creative, has the ability to think differently, and looks for uncommon solutions to problems as well as uncommon allies and partners. She is magnanimous, giving credit where credit is due. She is persistent and dedicated, spending whatever time or energy is necessary to accomplish the task at hand and setting an example for others.

Verveer's career reflects these values and every conversation about her and her work touches on them. At her swearing-in, Secretary of State Clinton encapsulated these qualities:

Melanne is most famous for the unwavering passion she brings to her causes. And for the last 15 years, that cause has been women and girls; their rights, their opportunities, their central importance to the future of our world's progress and prosperity. The absolute commitment she has always shown to giving voice to the voiceless, and making sure that the stories of everyday heroes and heroines would be known to a broader audience. She helped to launch the Vital Voices Democracy Initiative [within the US government] more than a decade ago, and she nurtured it and helped it to grow into what it is today. In the past eight years, she turned a government program into a global NGO, and the results of that work are ones that I encounter everywhere I travel on behalf of the United States. And she particularly helped to lead our commitment to end the intolerable scourge, the global crime of human trafficking. So I was pretty lucky that Melanne was willing to accept this nomination to be our first ever ambassador on behalf on the issues and the causes and the women and girls that she has worked for so many years. She's exactly the kind of diplomat that we need in the 21st century to exercise what we call smart power. . . . But she will, once again, be the vital voice to make sure that the concerns of women and girls remain central to the American foreign policy agenda. (Clinton, 2009, paras. 6–8)

Mary Daley Yerrick, a Republican, who cofounded and cochaired Vital Voices with Verveer, emphasized that Verveer "is a great leader in large part because she is an outstanding communicator. She has the inherent ability to frame an issue in a clear, concise and compelling manner" (Yerrick, 2009). Similarly, Baroness Mary Goudie, a member of the British House of Lords who served on the board of Vital Voices with Verveer summed it up:

She has a strong sense of mission and sees long term goals. She is clear on objectives and what she wants from people. She brings people together, and builds a team with skills to complement her own. Finally, I find her one of the most enjoyable people to work with. She can laugh and makes this work fun. (Goudie, 2009, n.p.)

Her work with Vital Voices reflects her skills and abilities to bring people together to lift others up. After 8 years of hard work, Vital Voices is now an international nonprofit organization that invests in emerging women leaders who are advancing economic, political, and social progress in their countries. Vital Voices has built a network of more than 7,000 women in 127 countries, providing these women and their communities with credibility, skills, and networks to build better lives. The stature of Vital Voices and its work is to a large degree due to Verveer's ability to bring people together around a common goal. The current president and CEO of Vital Voices, Alyse Nelson, who began working with Verveer while Vital Voices was a government program explains, Verveer "seeks power to empower others and she really motivates people because she is working just as hard—if not harder—than you are working" (Nelson, 2009, n.p.).

While Verveer's portfolio is focused on what some call "women's issues," she has an innate understanding that these issues reach every single person across the globe. She has the ability to frame issues broadly and engage women and men to recognize that issues commonly classified or characterized as "women's" issues really are issues that concern everyone. Often these issues have been seen as the purview of women's right activists.

Verveer understands the importance of involving women from the corporate and business spheres in the cause of women's rights across the globe. Bringing these women's talents and networks to bear on the challenges facing women across the globe has broadened the circle of engagement and brought new champions to the table.

She sees the fundamental obstacles for women and understands the power of bringing visibility and focus from all parts of the world to give women the confidence to rise up and achieve their potential. [Verveer] also knows the power of inspiring individuals with resources by giving visibility to women facing challenges. She knows how to make this critical connection. This motivates those with resources to join the cause to help as they are inspired as [Verveer] often shares the women's stories to make her points. These resources and this focus give the women the knowledge, tools, relationships and most of all confidence to do more . . . to pay it forward. (Brooke, 2009, n.p.)

Verveer also sees men as allies in her work. For example, in her work to combat human trafficking, she has sought out men in law enforcement as well as human rights advocates, again to widen the circle of those able to influence the process and politics, with the aim of protecting women and raising awareness of this horrible scourge. As one of her male colleagues says, Verveer understands that this problem

will not be solved working apart from men. She reaches out to engage the participation of men in addressing these issues. An example of this inclusiveness is her work on human trafficking. This has often been identified as a "women's issue." At times this was an attempt to marginalize and limit responses to the problem. However, the problem impacts us all—men, women, children, families, communities and nations—and [Ambassador Verveer] has sought a level of involvement reflecting the full breadth of the issue itself. (Warnath, 2009, n.p.)

As she herself says, "I think that the more ownership of the issue you have, the more that you get things done" (Verveer, 2009, n.p.).

Verveer's interest in foreign policy and international issues stems from her personal background. She is of Ukrainian decent, and both her grandparents immigrated to the United States at the turn of the 20th century. They settled in Pennsylvania and imbued in their family the traditions and culture of Ukraine, as well as the language and history of the country. While she was growing up, Ukraine did not exist as a separate country (it was part of the former Soviet Union). Ukraine was a special place to Verveer:

Being Ukrainian was a very important part of my life, being a Ukrainian-American. . . . I went to a Ukrainian grammar school, a Ukrainian high school . . . In school we sang the American national anthem. And then we sang [the Ukrainian national anthem]. And we learned all the time about what was happening in our ancestral homeland and how difficult the situation was for the people there. And every effort was made—certainly there was lot of praying—but there were a lot of other efforts made to provide support in very, very difficult times. (Gongadze & Baydyuk, 2009, para. 9)

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Verveer says that her passion and vision come from the way she was raised, in a family that worked hard and embodied what America is about. Her father was very community oriented and taught her about the critical difference that each person can make, regardless of his or her background. She sums up this lesson by quoting a famous line by Bobby Kennedy, "There are those who look at things the way they are, and ask why . . . I dream of things that never were and ask why not."

Being raised in an ethnic household was important. It made her conscious of the world around her and the fact that there were people living across the world in difficult circumstances, some under the Soviet Union. Her father was a postmaster, who helped people ship packages to what were then countries in the Soviet bloc. When she asked him about it, he said that these people lived in difficult circumstances and needed help. From all of this, she learned "the importance of political activism, internationalism, compassion and that everyone has a role to play. I also learned to appreciate different cultures and differences between people. I always had sensitivity and respect of culture and the unique contribution each group makes to the world" (Verveer, 2009, n.p.).

This background spurred her interest in events happening across the globe. She grew up reading the newspaper and listening to radio, and at school, she started a civics club, and subscribed to *Time*, *Newsweek*, and the *Congressional Record*. She went on a field trip to Washington, D.C., her junior year and decided to attend Georgetown University, from where she later graduated. She also met two people at Georgetown who would have a large impact on her life: her husband, Phil Verveer, now a deputy assistant secretary of state carrying the rank of ambassador, and Bill Clinton.

Verveer translated her family's personal story into policy, advocating throughout her career to make a difference. Critical to her ability to lead diverse groups is the firm belief that bringing people together to find common ground is more likely to bring concrete and real change and that having a wider circle makes your work more effective. Her clear focus is on results, finding common ground and understanding through which one can find agreement in unlikely places. As she says,

I am for making tangible progress forward. One of the most important lessons is that we should not let the perfect be the enemy of the good. We have to chisel out progress, common ground and not stay in our opposing corners. Another one of my favorite phrases in politics is "no permanent friends, no permanent enemies." As a Democrat, I do not assume that all Republicans disagree with an idea or won't join me. There may be one issue where we can work together today—and then not work together again for a while. There is much progress to be made when we cross party lines. Here in the US, for example, we have made great progress in issues like Title IX and women's health, with women coming across the aisle. (Verveer, 2009, n.p.)

Verveer has a talent for using her broad policy expertise, both foreign and domestic, to forge connections across these lines. For example, a great deal of her work in Washington, D.C., has focused on domestic issues, and she is able to use lessons learned from that work to inform her work across the globe and see how those lessons can be applied to help advance women's rights across the globe.

In short, Verveer embodies what real leaders are: people who understand that we all want to make a difference and need a vision of how to play a part in making that difference.

—Stephenie Foster, American Legacy Foundation

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