

REPORT

Women Look to 2020 to Break the National Security Glass Ceiling

Advocacy groups see the upcoming election as an opportunity to boost the number of women in senior positions.

BY LARA SELIGMAN | AUGUST 21, 2019, 11:23 AM

Michèle Flournoy is one of the most recognizable names in U.S. national security policy today, one often floated as a candidate to be the first female secretary of defense. But Flournoy says it will take more than one woman cracking the glass ceiling to change the role of women at the top of the field.

“We had a women’s leaders’ lunch in the Clinton administration in the Pentagon on the civilian side, and like eight of us had lunch together very conspicuously at one table,” recounted Flournoy, who served as undersecretary of defense for policy, one of the highest-ranking civilian positions at the Pentagon, from 2009 to 2012.

By the time President Barack Obama left office, that same luncheon “would have filled much of the executive dining room,” she told *Foreign Policy*. But it’s still not enough, Flournoy said.

Now Flournoy is part of a renewed effort to bring talented women with her up the male-dominated ranks of the Defense Department. She is on the honorary advisory committee for the Leadership Council for Women in National Security (LCWINS), a new initiative aimed at growing the ranks of women in the field.

The group challenged all 2020 presidential candidates to pledge gender parity in national security posts if elected, and so far **15 contenders**—all Democrats, including prominent male candidates such as Joe Biden and Bernie Sanders in addition to Elizabeth Warren, Kamala Harris, Amy Klobuchar, and others—have signed up. The group has reached out to President Donald Trump’s reelection campaign as well but has not heard back, Julianne Smith, a co-founder of LCWINS and a former Obama administration official, told *Foreign Policy*.

Though the number of female civilian leaders in the Pentagon increased notably under Obama, since Trump took office in January 2017, female representation in the very upper echelon of the Pentagon—never particularly high to begin with—has stagnated. So far in the Trump administration, only one undersecretary of defense position has been occupied by a woman: Ellen Lord, the Pentagon’s chief weapons buyer. Today, only 15 percent of those listed as **senior defense officials** on the department’s website are female.

The low numbers of women in senior national security positions do not reflect the emerging talent pool, experts say. But while more and more young women seem to be going into the field, the numbers dwindle when you look at the highest ranks. Today, **more than half** of graduate students of international affairs are female. But **women** have never exceeded 40 percent of senior positions (assistant secretary level and above) at the State Department, and at the Defense Department it is closer to 20 percent, **write** Heather Hurlburt and Tamara Cofman Wittes, also co-founders of LCWINS.

In the military, the numbers show a similar trend. While 20 percent of new lieutenants are female, women make up just 12 percent of colonels and less than 10 percent of generals and admirals, [according to Rosa Brooks](#), a law professor at Georgetown University who served as counselor to Flournoy from 2009 to 2011. On the civilian side, Brooks notes, women occupy only about a quarter of Senior Executive Service and supervisory positions.

This disconnect is due in part to the fact that women are not getting promoted equitably, and in part because more women than men leave the field before they move up to higher-ranking positions, write Hurlburt and Cofman Wittes.

“There is this sort of vicious cycle where the same prominent names get more and more attention,” Cofman Wittes told *Foreign Policy*.

In Congress and other agencies, women in national security have made some prominent strides. Trump named Gina Haspel as the first female director of the CIA in 2018, and women such as Republican Sen. Martha McSally and Democratic Sen. Tammy Duckworth have made their marks on defense-focused congressional committees as well.

But across the board, the number of women in senior positions in the national security world has remained relatively constant in the last few decades.

“After 30 years I really don’t see, stepping further back, that big of a percentage change of women in national security than I did 30 years ago,” said Gina Bennett, who has spent 31 years working in counterterrorism and was the first analyst to write a report warning about Osama bin Laden in the early 1990s.

In the Trump administration, Flournoy believes the lack of progress is not deliberate but rather a symptom of the White House’s lack of planning and shallow bench due to the “Never Trump” movement, in which the administration ruled out many career national-security experts who had disavowed the candidate during the campaign. Another challenge is that the administration has had a hard time attracting women given some of its social policies and the president’s own track record, she noted.

“I don’t think they thought a lot about transition of personnel policy before they were elected,” Flournoy said. “It’s been kind of a mad scramble from the beginning to get people into place.”

Flournoy and other leaders in the field are hoping to change that dynamic—and they see the 2020 presidential field, with its deluge of strong female candidates including Warren, Harris, Klobuchar, and others, as the perfect place to focus their efforts.

Cofman Wittes said the upcoming election presents a significant opportunity—whoever wins—to boost diversity in the upper ranks of the field. The 2020 campaign is an auspicious moment in time for this movement not just due to the flood of prominent female candidates vying for the chance to beat Trump, but also because of the “full pipeline of talented women in the field” right now, she said.

“For many years, many of us in this field have raised the question of, ‘Why aren’t there more women speaking at this conference?’ Or, ‘Why aren’t there more women around the conference table in the [Situation] Room?’ The answer often is, ‘I couldn’t think of any,’” Cofman Wittes said. “At this point, given the growth of women’s presence in the field, that is an inadequate answer.”

The next step for LCWINS after securing the pledge from the presidential candidates is to ensure its implementation. As the race for the White House heats up, the organization will be monitoring and

following up with the campaigns to ensure that senior appointments are made with an eye toward greater inclusion, Cofman Wittes said.

The group's broader aim is to ensure that whoever wins the White House, whether the Republican Trump or one of the Democratic contenders, has a wide pool of qualified female candidates to choose from to fill out all levels of their national security team, Smith, the LCWINS co-founder, said.

"It really starts at the top," she said. "You have to have a signal sent from the undersecretary level or the secretary level to say that this is a priority for us."

But the battle to increase the ranks of women in national security won't be won in the presidential arena alone. Another key is inspiring a new generation of women to go into traditionally male fields from a young age, said Lauren Bean Buitta, the founder of Girl Security, a nonprofit organization that seeks to interest high school girls in national security issues.

This July, Girl Security hosted about a dozen teenage girls and young women from across the country at the Rand Corp.'s office overlooking the Pentagon for an unusual assignment: a war game about a potential conflict with North Korea. The war game, which was designed to mimic the ones real-life military commanders and policymakers use to test potential strategies, involved a scenario in which U.S. talks with North Korea had collapsed, and the Korean Peninsula was thrown into war that could potentially turn nuclear.

"The goal was to try to provide the most high-level inaccessible experiences or experiences that would be otherwise inaccessible to younger women in the field," Bean Buitta said. "War-gaming sounds so out of reach to high school girls."

The young women were divided into two teams—a blue team representing the United States and South Korea, and a red team playing North Korea—and directed to use the military forces at their disposal to win the conflict. As the game progressed, Rand's "Dames of War Games"—as the women who designed the game call themselves—answered questions and advised the participants on different strategies.

In between decisions on how many special forces units to send to the border and whether to deploy chemical weapons, the girls and young women had lunch with prominent female leaders in the field, including Christine Wormuth, a former undersecretary of defense for policy, and Lynn Davis, a former undersecretary of state for arms control and international security affairs.

The game ended in a stalemate, but Girl Security leaders hope the unique experience will help shape the participants' interest in national security during their college years and beyond.

"I want to try to engage girls now when they are young and before they are predisposed. By the age of 5 or 6, they already think these are not fields for them, they are fields for boys," Bennett, the counterterrorism expert, said.

To change that perception, mentorship and ensuring the existence of prominent female role models will be key to encouraging more young women to go into national security, Bean Buitta said.

"We want to highlight women in the field so that those women at the undergraduate level are seeing women as they move through their careers," she said. "When a girl can identify with a woman in that capacity ... I think it can be really transformative and very compelling for the younger women."