



THE ESSENTIALITY OF  
**COGNITIVE DIVERSITY**  
IN AMERICAN NATIONAL SECURITY

by Rachel A. McCaffrey

*Two decades after UNSCR 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security was passed, the Biden administration appears poised to usher in a new era of female leadership. Why is this increase in cognitive diversity so important to American national security?*

The U.S. national security enterprise is undergoing a profound transition. As the world moves toward cyber and information-centric modes of conflict, cognitive and intellectual diversity will arguably play a more decisive role in determining success—more so than the number of infantry divisions, aircraft carriers, or fighter wings a nation can deploy. National security organizations must therefore transform to fully leverage all available talent and innovation in the national security sector to drive success across the spectrum of conflict around the world.

The complexity and interconnectedness of nations around the world make effective national security strategy development and operations extremely challenging. Boiled down, successful national security strategy, policy, and operations ensure the continued existence of nations and their way of life. This mandate places immense pressure on presidents when they build their senior leadership team. Presidents must choose a team to deter and defeat potential threats, and thus can neither afford poor nor ineffective leadership.

President Biden's transition teams featured three women leading operations for significant national security organizations: Dr. Kathleen Hicks at the Department of Defense; Ur Jaddou at the Department of Homeland Security; and Linda Thomas-Greenfield at the Department of State.<sup>24</sup> Choosing women to lead key national security transition teams appears to affirm President Biden's commitment to create a team that reflects the nation it serves. If his nominations follow suit, women will fill approximately 50 percent of President Biden's national security senior leadership team.<sup>25</sup>

It is important to note that President Biden is not selecting women based on a misguided quota system.<sup>26</sup> Our nation faces enormous challenges: an ongoing pandemic, rebuilding our economy, and ensuring we can diplomatically, informationally, militarily and economically defend American interests around the world. No single individual can solve these challenges because they demand an exceptional amount of creativity. These challenges require innovative solutions to ensure America emerges from this pandemic prepared to take advantage of opportunities by building on our most valuable resource: our talent. Only by leveraging the full breadth and depth of American talent will Biden tap into the cognitive diversity necessary to develop and implement the innovation necessary for our nation to thrive post-pandemic.

Why is cognitive diversity so critical in America's national security senior leadership? Cognitively diverse groups challenge each other's assumptions, helping to define

complex and ambiguous situations more clearly.<sup>27</sup> Fundamentally, it helps leadership teams avoid groupthink or "party line" assessments. Additionally, cognitively diverse leaders can access different education, training, and experiences to develop a spectrum of possible solutions to these security challenges. It amplifies creativity in formulating options. Finally, cognitive diversity enhances a leadership group's ability to adjust and adapt, rapidly and successfully, as situations evolve, a key requirement for effective national security strategy and operations. Different viewpoints make it more likely a group of leaders will recognize, at an earlier stage than that of a homogeneous group, the small and distinct tremors that could lead to earthquakes within the national security threat landscape.

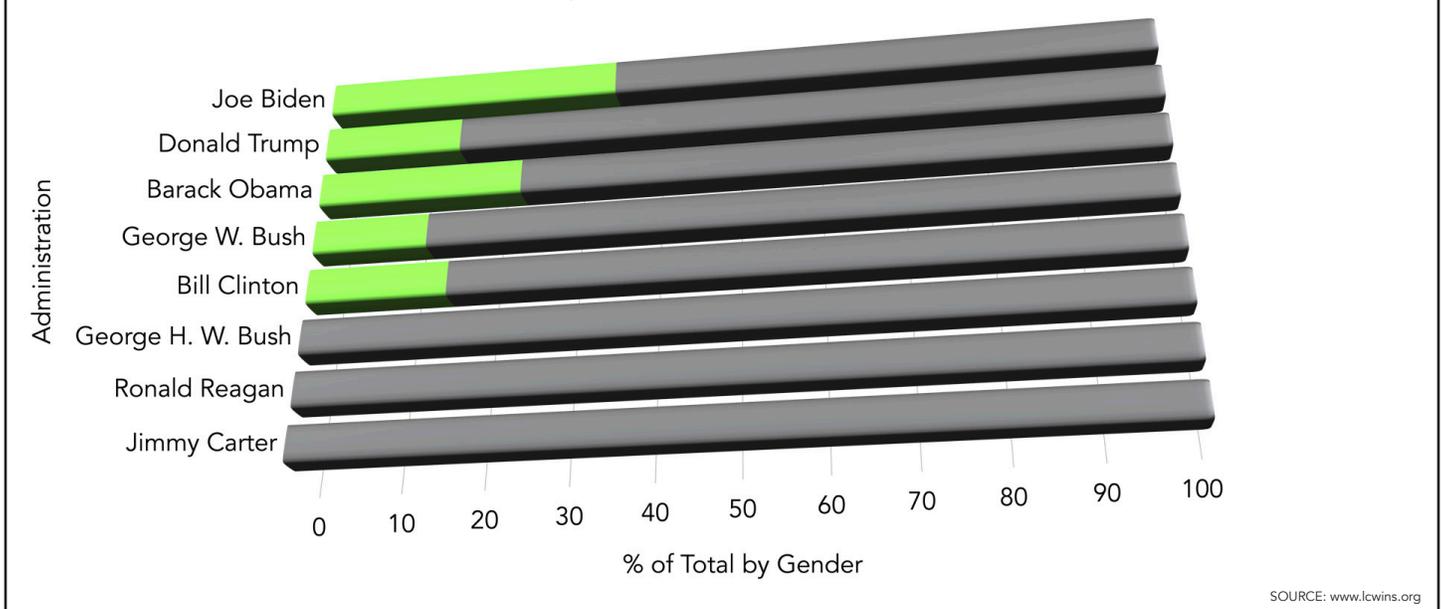
David Thomas and Robin Ely, writing in the *Harvard Business Review* in 1996, make these points about businesses, but their analysis undoubtedly also applies to national security:

*Diversity should be understood as the varied perspectives and approaches to work that members of different identity groups bring. They bring different, important, and competitively relevant knowledge and perspectives about how to actually do work—how to design processes, reach goals, frame tasks, create effective teams, communicate ideas, and lead. When allowed to, members of these groups can help companies grow and improve by challenging basic assumptions about an organization's functions, strategies, operations, practices, and procedures.<sup>28</sup>*

Diverse leadership groups offer competitive advantage over homogeneous groups, who will likely define problems and opportunities in the same way, and thus funnel themselves into predictable courses of action. Lu Hong and Scott Page argue "identity diversity" and "differences in...demographic characteristics, cultural identities and ethnicity, and training and expertise" can lead to "functional diversity," a description of "how people represent problems and go about solving them."<sup>29</sup> This drives groups with different backgrounds and experiences to consider alternatives both when defining challenges and developing potential courses of action, allowing them to harness the power of cognitive diversity to develop a deeper understanding of problems, and to imagine creative options to strategically mitigate them. This captures the raw value of leveraging the biggest, deepest available pool of talent when tackling emerging national security threats.

Ultimately, this can mean choosing a course of action takes more time. In many ways, selecting a cognitively diverse senior leadership team appears to counter many organizations' desire to streamline decision making. Additionally, senior leaders may not appreciate a "back bencher" questioning the way their education, training and experiences taught them to define the world and its problems. But the value of perspectives from individuals who do not speak from positions of power is that their

## Gender Breakdown of National Security Councils: Carter to Biden



education, training, and experiences may define the roots of problems differently, thus leading the group to identify different courses of action to solve volatile, uncertain, complex, ambiguous problems. Lu Hong and Scott Page further state that:

*In the common understanding, diversity in a group of people refers to differences in their demographic characteristics, cultural identities and ethnicity, and training and expertise. Advocates of diversity in problem-solving groups claim a linkage among these sorts of diversity (which we will refer to as identity diversity) and what we might call functional diversity, differences in how people represent problems and how they go about solving them. Given that linkage, they conclude that, because of their greater functional diversity, identity-diverse groups can outperform homogeneous groups.<sup>30</sup>*

This last point about “outperforming” is particularly salient. International security challenges, by their very nature, pit competing teams against each other, frequently in conflicts over power and resources. Losing carries unacceptable consequences. This makes national security the ultimate team sport, requiring leaders to work across bureaucratic stovepipes to reduce redundancy and amplify successful operations to ensure the success of the national security strategy. National security requires understanding of others’ interests, incentives, and disincentives because effective national security rests on coercion, “persuading someone to do something [or not do something] by using force or threats.” Thus, presidents need to prioritize a cognitively diverse and inclusive national security leadership team. So, how do they effectively build them? They need a big bench.

Traditionally, the pool of proven leadership across professionals and practitioners in national security is relatively small. The pool is inherently small because, in addition to tailored education and training, candidates

must demonstrate the knowledge, skills, abilities, and experience to effectively lead a sprawling bureaucracy and the world’s most capable military by successfully performing specific types of jobs at ever-increasing levels of responsibility. While the pool of potential leaders for senior civilian positions is broader than for senior military positions, which must hire from within the Services, for both groups, larger pools of demographically diverse and fully qualified candidates provide opportunities for hiring authorities to try to select for cognitive diversity in ways that expand options during national security crises.

Once a president assembles a diverse team, he or she needs policies and processes to leverage that diversity. It is entirely possible to have a diverse team that performs no better than a homogenous team, if the organization fails to take advantage of the cognitive diversity through extending true power to individuals. According to David Thomas and Robin Ely:

*What matters is how an organization harnesses diversity, and whether it’s willing to reshape its power structure. It involves having the power to help set the agenda, influence what—and how—work is done...and have one’s contributions recognized and rewarded with further opportunities to contribute and advance.<sup>31</sup>*

Thus, an effective national security leadership team needs cognitively diverse individuals who embrace new processes to leverage the full spectrum of talent available, and empower individuals from across the enterprise to participate, question, contribute, oppose, and enhance policies and operations. So how do you create a large bench from which a president can choose when assembling this senior national security team? You need to start early.

Secretaries of Defense, confirmed and acting, followed different paths to the Pentagon’s E-Ring, but they share common backgrounds across military service, senior



The Honorable Michèle A. Flournoy receives a tour of the Marine Corps Commandant house. U.S. Marine Corps photo by Lance Cpl. Christine Phelps

defense contractor positions, as elected officials with experience on defense committees, and increasingly senior positions in national intelligence and within the Department of Defense.<sup>32</sup> The commonalities stand out partially because of what they do not include: senior leaders without *any* prior experience in defense or national security. Reviewing the backgrounds of previous Department of Defense senior leaders, this highlights the requirement for candidates to demonstrate effectiveness in lower-ranking national security positions prior to consideration for positions with more responsibility and authority. This requirement or expectation for success in lower-ranking positions limits the candidate pool for the highest-level national security positions and means all candidates must work their way to the top by demonstrating effective intellect, initiative, innovation, and interpersonal skills.

Michèle Flournoy, frequently mentioned as a possible Biden Administration nominee for Secretary of Defense, models the type of career path necessary for such consideration. Flournoy began her national security career in 1986 as a research analyst at the Center for Defense Information, moving to the Arms Control Association and then to an International Security Program fellow position at Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government. She served in the Clinton Administration as Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Strategy and Threat Reduction and Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Strategy, where she was principal author of the 1997 Quadrennial Defense Review. She further sharpened her public policy skills as a research professor at the National Defense University and as a senior defense and

international security advisor at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). In 2007 Flournoy co-founded an influential new think tank, the Center for a New American Security (CNAS), arguing for a pragmatic, versus ideological, approach to U.S. foreign policy. In 2008 Flournoy worked as a Defense team lead during the Obama administration's transition, and President Obama nominated her as Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, the number three job and highest-ranking woman in the history of the Department of Defense.<sup>33</sup> Michèle Flournoy, by virtue of her success and effectiveness across a broad range of defense positions is "eminently qualified" to lead at the highest levels of the U.S. national security enterprise.<sup>34</sup>

While Biden ultimately nominated retired Army General Lloyd Austin, Flournoy's competitiveness for Secretary of Defense highlights a characteristic that strongly favors her for a future nomination: her strong, steadfast advocacy and "essential" mentorship of other women, in order to build a bigger bench.<sup>35</sup> As the political press speculated on the Secretary of Defense nomination, many highly accomplished women, and men, advocated for Flournoy because she previously advocated for them.

The outpouring of support was notable both for its depth as well as its breadth. Rosa Brooks quoted Madeleine Albright, who said "there's 'a special place in hell' for women who don't help other women," while also offering hope about "a special place in heaven for women who DO," highlighting how Flournoy went out of her way to



help other women succeed.”<sup>36</sup> Dr. Tamara Cofman Wittes, a Senior Fellow at Brookings, went into detail in a tweet supporting Flournoy:

*Our progress is due to pioneers and mentors who invested in building female NatSec talent. Michèle Flournoy's a major figure in that story. More than a role model, she brought many women (& men) into/ up through NatSec policy...She grows talent and gives it room to shine. POTUS-elect Biden wants a foreign policy for the rising generation, and she has supported next-gen policy talent for years.*<sup>37</sup>

Flournoy's impact was not an accident. Flournoy benefited from strong mentorship early in her career and relentlessly paid it forward whenever possible. As an undergraduate at Harvard, an academic mentor recommended she apply for a scholarship to Oxford, to obtain "...a great grounding in the fundamentals of international relations theory and practice." Of course, her Harvard education provided a solid foundation, so while the additional background was valuable, perhaps even more valuable was her opportunity to engage with fellow students. While at Oxford, when America acted in a way that impacted the world, Flournoy said she was forced to "...learn what had happened, figure out what [she] thought about it, and interpret American foreign policy for people from other countries.”<sup>38</sup> Oxford gave her first-hand knowledge

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of how diversity of background and experience lead to differences in understanding and desired outcomes.

Flournoy's first job after Oxford taught her to “choose the boss, not the job,” which she did in selecting her next position where she “...found Jane Wales, [who] was fantastic and became a lifelong mentor.” Then, when offered a choice between two jobs within the Clinton Pentagon, she passed on a position that “...sounded perfect on paper” to instead work for incoming Assistant

Secretary of Defense Ted Warner “who was already well known as a mentor of young people...[Flournoy] started as an office director, in two years became a DASD [deputy assistant secretary of defense], and two years after that...the principal deputy. [Warner] was a fantastic mentor, particularly to young women at a time when [they] were pretty scarce in the field.”<sup>39</sup> Flournoy picked the boss over the job, the mentor over a position seemingly tailor-made for her background and enjoyed success and rapid career progression as a result. Flournoy

recognized and appreciated the impact of Warner's trust, mentorship, and advocacy, and took on the same role for others when she established CNAS.

According to Flournoy, when she and Kurt Campbell founded CNAS, they wanted to “go to the pain’ — take on the hardest, most consequential issues, even

if controversial, and make headway on them.” Equally important to them, though, was building a strong and effective bench of policy talent. To quote Flournoy herself:

*“We also wanted to create a place that would give young people real professional development opportunities. If they worked on a report, they would get a byline on the report. They weren’t always just ghostwriting for senior people. We gave them media training, op-ed writing training; we paid as much attention to human capital development as to policy development. We were trying to produce people who could serve – the next generation of national security leaders. We wanted to showcase futures as opposed to formers.”<sup>40</sup>*

This imperative permeated Flournoy’s work as a mid- and senior-level defense leader. When asked what she was proudest of in her career, she answered: “The work I’ve done on building human capital—at the Pentagon, CNAS, WestExec and elsewhere. Your impact on policy may be ephemeral, but the impact you have on developing people and bringing up the next generation is incredibly long-lasting and meaningful, in ways you will never even know.”<sup>41</sup>

However, some of Flournoy’s impacts are indeed knowable now. Women and men she supported with education, training, advice, opportunity, and advocacy comprise the bench from which President Biden is selecting his senior national security staff. Several will serve in senior positions in the Biden Pentagon, including Dr. Kathleen Hicks, nominated for Deputy Secretary of Defense. Hicks served in the Undersecretary of Defense for Policy as the Deputy Undersecretary of Defense for Strategy, Plans and Forces when Flournoy served as Undersecretary, and Hicks moved to Principal Deputy Undersecretary of Defense for Policy just prior to Flournoy’s departure from the Pentagon. In June 2020, Hicks and Flournoy co-wrote an op-ed for Defense One in support of Biden’s campaign for President.<sup>42</sup> Now, Hicks will replace Flournoy as the most senior female defense official in U.S. history, and Flournoy played a role in preparing her for the responsibility and authority she will exercise.

Dr. Hicks and others who benefited from Michèle Flournoy’s support and advocacy will assume leadership positions in what will likely be the most demographically diverse senior national security leadership team in U.S. history. President Biden can draw on this diversity because of the mentorship and advocacy of dedicated, determined men and women over the past 40 years. Their investment in America’s human capital, our greatest resource, sets the condition for a successful transition into the next era of conflict.

Biden’s team will face new threats, especially in the cyber and space domains. Fortunately, because of the mentoring and advocacy of the previous generation, we have a broad bench of diverse practitioners and leaders available to leverage information and cutting-edge technology to mitigate risk and defeat threats in defense of America and its partners and allies. But to succeed, the Biden administration will need to ruthlessly employ inclusive processes to harness diversity in order to operationalize

innovation and collaboration across government, academia, and industry. And while addressing the many challenges facing our nation—ending the pandemic, fighting climate change, creating an economy that benefits all Americans and protecting the global commons—the Biden team must not only draw on the amazing talent that provides the foundation of U.S. strength, it must also invest in our human capital in ways that ensure the next generation of leaders develop the knowledge, skills and experience to lead future transitions.

Two decades ago, UNSCR 1325 affirmed the value of women in catalyzing success in peacebuilding and security. From Ireland to Liberia to Libya, history has proven that women bring essential cognitive diversity and creative insight to understanding the roots of conflict, negotiations and problem-solving.<sup>43</sup> Therefore, current and future presidents owe it to our nation to develop, access, and use all available talent to effectively defend forward against both active and potential threats.

***“Luck is what happens  
when preparation  
meets opportunity.”***

—Lucius Annaeus Seneca

<sup>24</sup>Biden-Harris Transition website, < <https://buildbackbetter.gov/the-transition/agency-review-teams/> > (accessed January 19, 2021).

<sup>25</sup>Aaron Mehta, “Biden’s Gender Parity Pledge Could Be Watershed Moment for Women in National Security,” *Defense News*, November 24, 2020, < <https://www.defensenews.com/pentagon/2020/11/24/bidens-gender-parity-pledge-could-be-watershed-moment-for-women-in-national-security/> > (accessed January 19, 2021).

<sup>26</sup>Ibid.

<sup>27</sup>Alison Reynolds and David Lewis, “Teams Solve Problems Faster When They’re More Cognitively Diverse,” *Harvard Business Review*, March 30, 2017 < <https://hbr.org/2017/03/teams-solve-problems-faster-when-theyre-more-cognitively-diverse> > (accessed January 19, 2021).

<sup>28</sup>David A. Thomas and Robin J. Ely, “Making Differences Matter: A New Paradigm for Managing Diversity,” *Harvard Business Review*, September-October 1996, < <https://hbr.org/1996/09/making-differences-matter-a-new-paradigm-for-managing-diversity> > (accessed January 19, 2021).

<sup>29</sup>Lu Hong and Scott E. Page, “Groups of Diverse Problem Solvers Can Outperform Groups of High-Ability Problem Solvers” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, November 16 2004; 101(46): 16385–16389 < <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC528939/> > (accessed January 19, 2021).

<sup>30</sup>Ibid.

<sup>31</sup>Thomas and Ely.

<sup>32</sup>Historical Office: Secretaries of Defense, “DOD History,” < <https://history.defense.gov/DOD-History/Secretaries-of-Defense/> > (accessed March 15, 2021).

<sup>33</sup>James Joyner, “Rethinking Flournoy as SECDEF,” *Outside the Beltway*, November 25, 2020, < <https://www.outsidethebeltway.com/rethinking-flournoy-as-secdef/> > (accessed January 19, 2021).

<sup>34</sup>Max Boot, “The Far Left May Not Like Her, but Flournoy would be a Great Pick for Defense Secretary,” *The Washington Post*, November 30, 2020, < <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/11/30/far-left-may-not-like-her-michele-flournoy-would-be-great-pick-secretary-defense/> > (accessed January 19, 2021).

<sup>35</sup>Ibid.

<sup>36</sup>James Joyner.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid.

<sup>38</sup>Michèle Flournoy, “How I Got Here: Michèle Flournoy,” *Foreign Affairs Career Center*, September 9, 2020, < <https://careers.foreignaffairs.com/article-details/15/how-i-got-here-michele-flournoy/> > (accessed February 2, 2021)

<sup>39</sup>Ibid.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid.

<sup>42</sup>Kathleen Hicks and Michèle Flournoy, “We Need Joe Biden,” *Defense One*, June 9, 2020, < <https://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2020/06/we-need-joe-biden/166033/> > (accessed February 2, 2021).

<sup>43</sup>“What You Need to Know about Northern Ireland and the Good Friday Agreement,” broadcast on PBS, March 20, 2019 (accessed February 2, 2021); The Norwegian Nobel Committee, “The Nobel Peace Prize 2011,” *NobelPrize.org*, 2011, < <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/2011/press-release/> > (accessed February 2, 2021); Todd Phinney, *Reflections on Operation Unified Protector* (National Defense University Press, 2014).

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