

*Anita McBride is the Executive in Residence at the Center for Congressional and Presidential Studies at American University's School of Public Affairs. As the former Director of White House Personnel, McBride's White House service spans two decades and three presidential administrations. In this candid interview, McBride shares her insights on what it would mean for the country to have a woman president, how it would change the internal workings of Washington, and what it would mean to have our first "First Gentleman". She also discusses what she finds rewarding in the pursuit of public service and her ideas on how we could facilitate more opportunities for women's political leadership.*

**Marianne Schnall:** Well, thank you so much for agreeing to talk to me for this. And so just as an overview, in anticipation of the 2016 election Political Parity and Feminist.com are partnering on this major multimedia campaign to sort of continue this conversation that I began with my book, *What Will It Take To Make a Woman President*, and so thank you so much for offering to share your insights.

**Anita McBride:** Of course. I'm delighted to participate. Thank you.

**MS:** So, you have served in three presidential administrations. What do you think it would mean for our politics, our country, and our culture to have a woman President?

**AM:** Well, I think that the time is right. I think that politics has changed so much. I think there are so many different people from different backgrounds getting involved in politics, so I think that there is an opening. I think the window is right. I think it's more and more we hear consistently a woman's perspective, a woman's voice brings a lot to the table, and not to disparage men but it's that we know in every situation collaboration is important to solving problems, and women are good collaborators. So I think that the environment around a woman leading our country is one that is the country is ready for it.

I'm not advocating one of the female candidates against the other at this moment. I think time will tell, but based on the issues and leadership qualities that they exhibit, but I think that any of the barriers about a woman being capable of leading the country, I really do believe those are gone. And I think that is an important thing, an important move forward for our country that that is just not a barrier that I believe exists for us now.

**MS:** Well, that is certainly a very hopeful answer. Not many people can say that they have worked behind the scenes at the highest levels for so long in the White House. Do you think it would change the internal workings of the White House to have a woman President?

**AM:** That is, it is a great question. Believe me, it is one that I have thought-- I have thought about what would the dynamics be in the Oval Office and the people that surround the President, and, honestly, I really do think we have made so many strides with so many senior women holding incredibly high profile jobs, and important jobs, like National Security Advisor, like Homeland Security Advisor, these are jobs that are in the Oval Office every day, they are women that are leading them, they are in the space of some of our most intractable and important issues at home and around the world.

So I think that the dynamics around the Oval Office and the West Wing, I think that would adapt. I think where the change would be is in the East Wing side, actually, and that is not to be diminished, because that is part of the package. That role that the President's spouse plays in the East Wing is a real partner to the Presidency and I think that is where the change would be more perceptible, frankly, in terms of the inner workings than having a woman in the Oval Office. I know that may sound strange, but I really have thought about this and I think our country and I think the White House really does, the White House adapts to its occupants, it truly does. And there is a way it's just from transition day forward that it just happens and it comes together.

So, I am optimistic about the inner workings of the White House and the West Wing going rather smoothly, frankly.

**MS:** I actually hadn't really thought through, that is true, I wonder what the effects of having, I guess we still don't know the terminology, a First Man, a First Gentleman, how that will alter our, the stereotypes that we attribute to genders.

**AM:** Right, because actually I think there is more of a stereotype with that role of the East Wing, the First Lady, than there is with the President. The President is, even the terminology is unisex. We have only had a man in it, but the term, the President could refer to a man or a woman. The First Lady, that is a completely different thing in that there will be an addressment there that again I feel we can adapt, the roleplaying will shift a little bit and different people, particularly if the spouse has, if it's a

female President and the President's spouse has a job outside of the White House, which could very likely be the case, how will that manifest itself in the White House, because people do forget that position is very demanding and there is so much that you're called on to do, not just the ceremonial aspect, which is important and that is an important reflection of our country, but it is also the President's best surrogate oftentimes and it's a position whose influence is deployed immediately from the moment that the President takes the oath of office and how they-- And they get to rewrite the position description every single time, no matter who is in it, because they get to pick and choose what they want to work on. So how will the President deploy the influence of that person is a question too.

**MS:** It will be fascinating to see how it plays out. Now you alluded a little bit to this in your previous answer, but politics is often certainly described as gridlocked. Do you think having a woman President and just more women on both sides in Washington generally would extend a more collaborative approach?

**AM:** Well, I hope so. I'm certainly optimistic for that part of it, and you're right, I did allude to that. I just think it's human nature, frankly, for women to be collaborators, and to really seek to find some common ground. And it's not that they don't hold on to their principles. But I often thought about when Barbara Mikulski decided she was going to retire and I really thought about how she was the female Senator who hosted all members, female members of the Senate at her home or for a dinner. I think it was a monthly dinner. And there was no staff, no telephones, no note taking. It was off the record. Purely getting together as the women members of the Senate. And when she decided to retire I thought, "Gee, who is going to step up and do that?" Because I thought that is such a great example of-- And these are women who have very different sides of the aisle. I mean Barbara Boxer and Terry Ayotte or Hillary Clinton on one side and Kay Bailey Hutchison on the other.

You look at them, these are like, Kay Bailey Hutchison and Malanne Verveer and were the Co-Chairs of Vital Voices. They came together around a global women's empowerment issue, Kay Bailey Hutchison was the Republican face of a Hillary Clinton initiative. So I think there are examples like that where, and very effective, and are ones that we can hold up as possibilities for breaking through gridlock.

**MS:** I want you to know that in my interviews a lot of the female Senators both current and past brought up those dinners.

**AM:** I don't know if the dinners have continued, but I think that that is a great example and one that should be promoted as what can get done behind the scenes, because we often hear-- And don't forget, I worked for real old-timers like George H.W. Bush who came into this process as a Congressman from Texas, moved his whole family here, Barbara Bush was very integrated as a Congressional spouse, so were the people of their time. They lived and worked together. They did things together on both sides of the aisle.

Barbara Bush talks about how when Lyndon Johnson became President and Johnson was a creature of the Congress, and one of the first things Ladybird did was invite the spouses of the Congressional members to the White House and up to the residence on both sides of the aisle. I mean, things like that were the norm for people like the Bushes who I worked for. And the years that I was in the White House under George H.W. Bush, his tennis buddies were, it was Sonny Montgomery, a Democrat from Alabama, or it was Dan Rostenkowski until he did him in on the budget deal, but really things were, those were, the Democratic members of the House and Senate were their guests as much as the Republican members were.

And that is missing. That is really gone now. And I saw too with George W. Bush. So many, and very little press was ever made of this of how many members on both sides of the aisle were invited for small receptions or small dinners before state dinners or official dinners. Mrs. Bush would do a tasting dinner and they would invite members of Congress on both sides of the aisle and their spouses, a small group of 12. Those are really important things to do. I don't think President Obama used that as effectively as he could have and should have, but it does-- That is a good point, that personal relationships are a real critical factor to breaking gridlock, and we are at a loss for that right now.

**MS:** Yeah no, I agree. That is a hope that women would bring that more collaborative consensus building approach. Now, right now is sort of an exciting time in the sense that we actually have Hillary Clinton, Carly Fiorina, and also Jill Stein is running as an Independent. How would you expect gender dynamics to affect the 2016 election with three women running for President?

**AM:** Well, I think, you know I'm a big believer on if they focus on what is ultimately important, which is their responses to the issues and the critical

issues of the time, and the questions that are being asked to them, I think the debates are so important. And I know it looks like a circus up there for the Republicans, but look at the example of Carly Fiorina moving from the children's table to the big boys' table, because she was crisp and precise and prepared. And that is just, that is what they need to do. I think that really showed people, "Holy cow, there are multiple, there is more than one woman capable of being able to talk about the most important issues of the day."

Now, I don't know whether it's enough to get all the votes to become President of the United States, but she is at the table now and was able to really turn around the perception of her ability to go at it in one debate. It's like anything, and she says that all her life she has had to, all her career she has had to fight for her seat at the table, and you do it by being prepared and being able to respond and not being emotional about it, although we want to use our emotions, I think, as women in a productive way, but being ready to stand tough. This is a tough job and it has, I think people want to be confident that they can stand up to their counterparts all around the world, male or female.

**MS:** And what do you feel about the level of sexist treatment by the media or just there was a lot of attention on that with Hillary's 2008 run and even the coverage of Sarah Palin, do you feel that that has improved or do you think this is still an issue?

**AM:** I think it's improved. I mean I think that there is always a little bit of an issue, although I have to say, honestly, even like the last couple of debates with Carly Fiorina I didn't see any coverage about really what she wore. She was the one that said something later, "Yes and I did it in heels" as a joke, but I didn't, and tell me if I'm wrong, because you may have paid a lot more attention to that part to be prepared for this interview than I did, but I saw a lot less of that than really the circus that surrounded Sarah Palin and the money that she spent on her clothes and the credit card of the campaign or the RNC that she used to actually have, that her Campaign Advisor said she needed an expensive wardrobe, that was all around, that was just an unfortunate and a very costly misstep. And plus then also very different personalities, I think, in the way that Carly Fiorina and Hillary Clinton approach the responses to questions is different than Governor Palin who had a very narrow kind of support.

**MS:** The improvement I've seen also lately is that when there [are] sexist comments there is immediate response, so I think that is definitely positive.

**AM:** I agree.

**MS:** Talking more generally, what changes do you think we could make to facilitate more opportunities and advancement for women's political leadership?

**AM:** Well, I think one of the things that I am really more encouraged about too is there are more opportunities for young women at an earlier age to be educated about civic participation and possibilities. I'll give you just an example. You probably are familiar, because Susanna [Welford] I was at one of our Political Parity events, [00:16:55] runs that program Running Start, Running Start that really goes into middle schools and high schools and encourages young women to get involved in student government, get in the, apply for these summer leadership programs that they do here in Washington. And Susanna has been at this for quite some time and is really building a reputation, corporate support, companies that are getting behind women's empowerment issues, and I think she has really found an important niche.

I would love to see that as a model that is replicated really around the country and in different communities. I mean to start at that very basic level of young girls in middle school and high school, putting themselves out there for student government, that is an amazing start and an empowering start. I mean I'll be honest with you, that was, I was President of my senior class in high school, that totally opened my world and that is back in 1975, '76, and I'm still sort of at it. Now, granted, I've never run for office myself, but I have found other ways to stay engaged and involved and add value.

So, I think examples like that are really important, and we need more models like that. That would be one step. The other too is I think that the organizations like Democratic State Leadership Committee, Republican State Leadership Committee that are doing a better job of identifying and recruiting and supporting women at the local levels of government, I think that is really smart.

So I think there is movement in that direction. The numbers are still not where we want them to be, and I would love to ultimately that we see a

balance, not that it has to be more women than men or certainly not more men than women, but a balance would be, I think, a terrific goal for our country.

**MS:** Oh I agree. Given your longtime work with the Republican Party, do you think there are inherent challenges being a woman in the Republican Party?

**AM:** You know, I guess I have to personally say I never felt them. I have always worked for a woman. I worked for a woman when I was a campaign volunteer for Ronald Reagan in 1980, Mary Ann Fish who was running the Reagan campaign here in Connecticut. When I came to the White House I worked for a woman that had a, the head of Correspondence. When I was promoted into Management and Administration the head of Management and Administration for the White House Complex was a woman. So, I personally have never seen it, and that is over a 30 year trajectory in conservative administration that people just would give us benefit of the doubt that there are women in leadership, and they certainly had it in the Bush 43[rd President] White House. So, my personal experience with it has not been negative. It has actually been very positive.

Now, I can't say that is everybody's experience. I think that the RNC has done a better job of promoting women into running some of their leadership positions, including even the convention, the Chief Operating Officer is a woman. It's a big job to be negotiating with all these campaigns right now. And so I guess my personal experiences have been positive. I can't, I'm not saying that is the case for everyone.

I know my last role in the White House as Bush's Chief of Staff, I was promoted by a male Chief of Staff to be at the Assistant to the President level, I suppose, to one tier down as the Deputy Assistant to the President, which was the traditional title for that role. But it is really based on not so much I was a woman in the job but that the job was on par and in parity with other leadership positions on the senior staff, and Josh Bolton was a great promotor and when he was Chief of Staff he promoted my position to Assistant to the President, but commensurate with that too is gave us a level of responsibility to show that we were engaged in activities and initiatives that were supporting the administration. We had the Malaria Initiative to run or where Bush was the face of the AIDS Initiative.

So that I, again I'll go back to saying my personal experience over a very long period of time was one where I was treated quite fairly and I worked for women all the way through.

**MS:** Would you have any particular advice to young Republican women who may be considering a career in public service?

**AM:** Yeah, I think it's do your homework, work real hard. I mean I said the same thing to my son. You always want to be prepared. You always want to take initiative. Be willing to speak up. Always have something prepared to say. Know how to ask a question. And it's just sort of human, these are important skills and traits for any of our kids, boys and girls, but I think particularly for, yes, young Republican women who the party has the perception of not promoting its women, I think the key to success is to be interested, be involved, and be prepared.

**MS:** That's great advice generally. Was there a particular event in your life that sparked you to get involved in politics? And what would you say to sort of reignite inspiration in pursuing a career in political life?

**AM:** Mine was a very specific experience. I was a junior in college. I was doing a junior year abroad in Italy. It was 1979, November of 1979, the American hostages were taken in Iran and I was living overseas as a young student, and I was quite shocked at the response by the Italians and other foreign students at the university I went. I went to an Italian university, the University of Florence, and it had students from really all around the world and the Mideast and Europe and as well as Italians. And the response, one of celebration by these young people my age of this attack on the United States was so shocking to me, because my background, it's sort of a platform to this, was I'm a child of an immigrant family that left their birth country to come to their adopted country and this is where they made their life, and they looked at the United States with great reverence and respect for the opportunities it provided, and that is what the frame of reference within which I grew up.

So a deeply patriotic family, not political, they became citizens, registered to vote, it ended there where they voted. They weren't political at all. They were registered as Democrats, because most immigrants were. They were laborers and they were in factory work and they were unionized, but that didn't change the respect they had. There was no light of day between them and anybody else in the Republican Party on the patriotism



for their country and the opportunities it provided. So that was my framework.

So here I go overseas, this happens, I see this reaction by people my age of being happy that the United States was attacked, and it was the trigger for me. It was very confusing, actually. I'll be honest with you. And it was a trigger for me when I came back home to the United States after the year was over. It was the height of the Presidential campaign of 1980. Ronald Reagan had not won the primary yet, but it was Jimmy Carter against the Republican nominee. And I got sort of interested at that point. And a friend of mine who had graduated college the year ahead of me, so he was a senior that had graduated, I came back into my senior year, he was working the Reagan campaign in Hartford, Connecticut, and he called me and he said, "We could really use some volunteers. Do you want to round up some students to come here?"

And I already said all the things people my age said then who were uninformed, "Oh I hear Reagan is a warmonger. He's this. He's that." He said, "You need to read about each of these people." I mean literally I had to be reminded of something so basic, and I think that is a problem today too, you need to know what the candidates are talking about and you need to know their background. So I went and I started volunteering and started reading the literature. I recruited a few friends. We were working the phone banks. And that is what hooked me.

Then Reagan had won the primary and that is what hooked me. It was an action forcing event outside of my country that caused me to look at my participation in my country's politics a lot differently.

**MS:** And these days where it can seem very unattractive to pursue a career in politics, just because of all the gridlock, all the dysfunction that all we hear about is the negative, what in your mind are the rewards of a career and life in public service?

**AM:** Well I have to say, honestly, I really do, I look back, at the end of the day I look back on the years, I say, I've come out of it saying, "I really got something done." And even if it's as minor as, it may seem minor as being part of putting together the trips that took Laura Bush to Africa 15 times to promote what the President's emergency plan for AIDS relief was doing for people overseas and saving seven million lives, being part of something like that is really very empowering. Now there is a lot of negative that comes with being in politics too, right, and we were in a

very controversial administration and controversial period of time, but there really is truly an opportunity to do something important and something really big when you're at these highest levels of our public policy.

But you definitely have to be open to criticism, you have to have an open mind about when things don't work, but you have to be committed and you have to be loyal to the cause. And I really sort of look back and say, "I'm really very-- I feel so honored and privileged not to have one, two, not one or two times, but three times to have been able to sit there behind the scenes." Some of them doing low level jobs-- Even my first job reading Ronald Reagan's mail, believe it or not that's what I did, and putting together the samples that went to him, and knowing that a cross-section of both supportive and critical mail, that you are responsible for putting that in front of the President and getting a response back from him that went to an average American that wrote in to him who will never see the President of the United States, but they have the power to write to their President and getting a response.

That was where I really still look back on that period of time as something so important to me to have been able to do. And because of the shock that it had for some people that they were actually getting an answer back, but the joy that it brings to others, and it just is, it's very empowering. You can get things done. You can touch people's lives. You really have an opportunity to do that, put this time into making good public policy.

And I think the other thing too for a political appointee as opposed to someone in the career in service, as an political appointee you have such a short snapshot in time within which to do that, so you really do feel the pressure. If you're really serious about being there you do feel the pressure of time really to get something done. And I think that too in itself can be very empowering.

**MS:** Well, thank you so much for sharing your important and inspiring insights with us today and for all the work that you do. We really appreciate it.

**AM:** Well, I appreciate you doing this, and again I am so sorry about the confusion on the number. I was almost sure I gave the cell phone, then when I got home and looked at my computer and saw holy cow I gave you the office number, and of course I had stepped away from my office

phone. So, thank you for your patience. Please let me know if there is anything else you need from me or that I can do for you, and good luck.

**MS:** Thank you so much.