

FIRST PERSON

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Girl Power

Swanee Hunt, the head of the women and public policy program at Harvard's Kennedy School, is rallying female millionaires to support women's causes worldwide.

By Michael Blanding | November 11, 2007

Your father was an arch-conservative Texas oil baron, yet you've spent your inheritance supporting liberal causes. Do you think he is rolling over in his grave?

Sometimes I think yes, but then I think he'd roll back in the other direction, because he had such appreciation for zeal and thinking beyond boundaries.

This week you and your sister Helen are unveiling a new venture to enlist wealthy women to donate at least a million dollars each to advance women's causes around the world. How did you come up with this idea?

In history, whenever we've seen a major breakthrough for women, it has been mostly funded by men. Often if you ask women to support an issue, they'll donate their time, but they see writing a check as somehow diminishing who they are. As a result, women's causes have been underfunded by women. Women have got to get comfortable writing the very big checks.

In your book *Half-Life of a Zealot*, you talk a lot about how faith has inspired your activism. Does it still drive you in your work - especially now that people associate religion with Republican values and evangelicals?

I pick up something like the New Testament and read about how the King is born in a barn, and I think that's revolutionary - it turns the whole social order upside down. You don't find God in rich houses; you find God in the struggle.

You've spent a lot of time working to elect women to office. Why?

Leverage, leverage, and leverage. The decisions that affect the most people by a thousandfold are done from the governor's mansion, the US Congress, and the Oval Office. Research shows when you have a higher percentage of women in a parliament, you have more funding for education and health and less corruption and defense spending. Women think a very long time before they send their children out to kill other people's children.

You've known Hillary Clinton since you were an ambassador to Austria under President Bill Clinton. What advice would you give her in running for president?

I would say forgo some of the policy recommendations and give people insight into what makes her tick, because what makes her tick is beautiful.

Why is it harder for women to get elected to public office?

It's very difficult for women to raise early money, because they don't fit the stereotype of what people think a great leader is. Every woman wanting to lead has to get up in the morning and decide, "Should I be an ideal leader or an ideal woman?" That's one hell of a decision. ■