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Interview with Michèle Flournoy

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Summary:

Michèle Flournoy discusses her career trajectory, starting with her early interest in nuclear security during the Cold War, which was sparked by the threat of nuclear conflict. She reflects on her work across various think tanks and governmental roles, emphasizing the importance of bipartisan, forward-looking analysis in addressing emerging security challenges. Flournoy highlights the founding of the Center for a New American Security (CNAS), which aimed to foster innovative solutions and professional development in national security. She concludes by addressing the persistence of nuclear weapons, the challenges of disarmament, and the importance of adapting policies to multilateral deterrence and emerging threats. This document summary was generated by an artificial intelligence language model and was reviewed by a Wilson Center staff member.

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Michal Onderco: So, thank you very much for finding the time to talk to me. I want to start with a very general question which I asked everyone, which is: how did you become interested in questions of peace and security, and why these issues?

Michele Flournoy: Well, actually, when I finished my graduate work at Oxford, it was the early to mid-1980s. And it was the period where we had a lot of nuclear saber-rattling between Reagan and Gorbachev at the time. And it seemed to me, if we didn't manage this problem, with arms control and disarmament, we wouldn't be around very long to deal with anything else. So it was actually the kind of the climate change issue of my day, the fear of a nuclear holocaust, nuclear war all of that. So that's what motivated me to get started in the field.

Michal Onderco: And you started your career working in different civil society organizations, you worked for some time at the Arms Control Association, you later worked at Belfer. Why did you choose these organizations? What was appealing about these organizations for you?

Michele Flournoy: Well, I think what I was interested in is really, developing as an analyst and understanding the dynamics of the nuclear arms race and nuclear deterrence, and how can we construct arms control agreements that would over time reduce the nuclear danger. And so the Arms Control Association, I worked a lot on the START treaty and its implications, and then the INF Treaty. And then at Belfer had the privilege of working with Joe Nye, and Graham Allison, and [NAME UNCLEAR] on their avoiding nuclear war project. And we worked on a whole range of issues, including what later became the Cooperative Threat Reduction Program and the related legislation which ensured that only one nuclear weapons state emerged from the collapse of the Soviet, as opposed to four.

Michal Onderco: you later worked in government, in the Clinton administration. But then you went again to work in research, and you work at NDU, and at CSIS. Again...

Michele Flournoy: And then most importantly started CNAS.

Michal Onderco: And then you started CNAS. So for me the question is: so why did you sort of choose these institutions? And what did you think was missing that you started the CNAS?

Michele Flournoy: So I remember, I think it's in one of Henry Kissinger's memoirs, he talks about when you're in government, you unpack your intellectual suitcase. And that we all should recognize that the point at which we have no new intellectual capital, that's a good time to leave and repack our suitcase. Well, being in the think tank world was a way to repack the intellectual surface. To step back, gain perspective, have a more strategic view, and also move into new areas. So one of the things that happened for me in the Clinton administration is that I was able to broaden from a focus on nuclear issues to broader defense policy and defense strategy. And so it was sort of the natural place for me to come out and land... first at NDU, I agreed to do a one- or two-year project, for then Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, to help him develop ideas for the next Quadrennial Defense Review. And then John Hamre, who had been deputy secretary when I was in the Clinton administration, he asked me to come over to CSIS. And I was there for about six years working on a range of topics, from post-conflict reconstruction, to how do we build more capability and capacity at NATO, and all kinds of topics. And then Kurt Campbell and I had this crazy idea that Washington needed another think tank. And people told us we were crazy and that we shouldn't leave CSIS, a leading think tank. But we felt that there was room for a slight a somewhat different formula number one, a think tank that was not afraid to what

we call “go to the pain”, take on the most controversial issues in a non-partisan way, and really try to wrestle them.

And at the time, it was the Iraq War and whether you were for or against the Iraq War at the beginning, we were in it, how do we engineer a responsible exit for the United States and its allies. Number two, we were looking to create a think tank where the only product was not just the ideas and the reports, but also people. Really put an emphasis on professional development for the next generation of national security professionals.

And, finally, just a think tank that was very agile and entrepreneurial, and that built a community that attracted lots of people, whether they were full-time or adjuncts. And sort of a think tank that would go to the white space, meaning not take on the issues that have already been identified as important, but try to identify what's coming next.

Michal Onderco: I have by now spoken to a lot of people who work in a lot of different think tanks, and they often mentioned, one of the big problems that they face in their work is the lack of funding and the fact that you sort of need to find people who are willing to fund you. Sometimes institutes are fortunate, they have endowment, so it's easier for them. Others, for them it's more complicated. I imagine that this is a big issue if you're starting a new think tank. How did you go about thinking about how to basically finance the whole enterprise?

Michele Flournoy: Well, at the beginning, because it was brand new, we had to find some individuals of means who would sort of place a bet on us, if you will. And one of the things that we realized was, because we hadn't produced anything yet., and Kurt and I were not as that well known at that point, we needed some folks who would both guide us and give us give the effort credibility. And so the recruiting of our board, our initial board, was very important. So we had Bill Perry, who agreed to be our chairman, God bless him. We had Madeleine Albright, we had the former head of Lockheed Martin, Norm Augustine, John Podesta, who helped us fundraise, found our first million-dollar donor. So, we just had a wonderful set of very senior people who were willing to endorse us and to say: “these people are serious, you should invest in them.” And then once we started producing work, we could take that work to foundations and others, and the funding became easier. But it was not... I mean, a startup is a startup, there were many years where we were always scrambling for funding. And happy to say that, we don't have a big endowment, but we're on a very stable footing now that we're 15 years old.

Michal Onderco: So you said that what you felt was the gap in the think tank between sphere in Washington? What do you think over time has become the edge of CNAS?

Michele Flournoy: The edge?

Michal Onderco: Of CNAS.

Michele Flournoy: The advantage you mean?

Michal Onderco: Yes.

Michele Flournoy: I think first of all, creating an environment that is truly nonpartisan. When I came back as CEO, the President was a Republican, I was a Democrat, I mean, creating an environment that is truly bipartisan in terms of the people and nonpartisan in terms of the work and proving that again, and again. Secondly, I say doing cutting edge work, defining issues before... there were other think

tanks were working on... we were the first think tank to have a climate national security program, we were the first think tank to really treat AI as a national security issue. Just always trying to find the white space and to move... which is challenging, because usually you're ahead of the funding community. you have to sort of take some initiative, and have some unrestricted funding that allows you to do that innovation, and then try to help others support you. And then the people, I think, what Secretary Gates once said, something along the lines of... he was asked, why hadn't he gone to speak at CNAS? After, a period of time, he'd spoken a lot of other think tanks. He said: "well, if I want to see people from CNAS, I just have a staff meeting." The idea was, we had succeeded in creating that talent pipeline that was now serving in government.

Michal Onderco: Do you think that that's something that other think tanks share, or at least it's an ambition that other think tanks share as well?

Michele Flournoy: I think after seeing CNAS started the next gen Leaders program, I think almost every national security think tank I can think of, did something similar. Which is great, because that's the kind of effort you want to see proliferate, and to really have programs that are expressly focused on developing people, and helping them to become leaders in the field.

Michal Onderco: So you mentioned already that you started your career working on nuclear issues. From the vantage point of 2023, what do you think is the role of nuclear weapons in the world today?

Michele Flournoy: I think we have succeeded in pushing nuclear weapons into the background of national security for the most part. I think people understand they exist, that nuclear deterrence is still a foundational aspect of our national security. But it's not at the forefront of our policy day to day in the sense that leaders don't generally run around making nuclear threats on a regular basis. Now there are exceptions, an exception is Vladimir Putin. Russia has developed a different kind of nuclear doctrine, which is sort of escalate to de-escalate. If you realize that your military may be conventionally inferior you threatened to use nuclear weapons early to try to deter any conventional conflict. So he's an exception. I also think dynamics are changing, China has long had a minimal nuclear arsenal, and now they are modernizing, they're growing that, and developing new capabilities. So that is of concern. So we're going from a framework where we long thought in bilateral terms, mainly deterrence focused on Russia, or Soviet Union, and now Russia, and now we also have to think about the nuclear dynamics with China and Russia together.

Michal Onderco: You mentioned that you started working on nuclear issues in the tail end of the Cold War. So as the Cold War sort of ending and you worked on these arms control agreements that were seen as very successful at the time. And these days, people often see nuclear weapons as an area where things have gone in sort of not such a successful direction. I want to ask you, what do you see as the biggest failure in the field since the end of the Cold War? And what do you think could have been done to prevent it?

Michele Flournoy: That's a good question. I think the biggest failure is that we did not succeed in convincing Russia that it was better off staying within the frameworks that we had cited. So first, they abrogated the INF Treaty. Now they're sort of basically walking away from new start. We've also had problems with US administration's walking away from agreements like Trump's abrogation of the JCPOA, with Iran. So I think that has really hurt arms control in general. I mean, arms control has brought us a lot of stability, and transparency, and verification, and reassurance that enabled nuclear

weapons to be pushed farther into the background. With that absent those frameworks, and confidence, and verification of those frameworks, the issues start creeping forward. So here we are today, after the abrogation of the JCPOA by the Trump administration, with "are Iran on the brink of having enough to enrich uranium to build a bomb?" So I think failure to really ensure that we had a strong bipartisan consensus in the US, but also a strong buy in from others.

Michal Onderco: Do you think that there is something concrete that can be blamed for the failure? Either a person or sort of a body?

Michele Flournoy: I think I would blame Putin on the Russian side, that he's just taken a different approach than his predecessors. And I would put some blame on the Trump side in terms of the JCPOA for sure.

Michal Onderco: One of the things that think tanks always want to achieve or want to claim is that they made an impact, that they somehow changed change things. And you already mentioned that part of how your think tank has been doing impact is by training people who can then go into administration. Are there other ways? How do you think organizations like CNAS, or other think tanks where you worked at, can actually deliver policy impact?

Michele Flournoy: I think the actual analytic work sometimes if you are sort of looking over the horizon ahead of where the existing policy debate is, you can help frame what comes in the future. And you can contribute to the intellectual capital that policymakers are using different policy. I think think tanks make a mistake when they try to kind of Monday morning quarterback, what the administration did yesterday, all the time going in the media and commenting on that. There's some of that's necessary, or I understand, I think their real value is when they're out ahead of the policymaker, looking over the horizon, and coming up with ideas that will help them as threats or challenges emerge in the future.

Michal Onderco: So can you give me an example, when you or any of the organizations where you worked at have been able to sort of deliver this type of impact?

Michele Flournoy: I mean, I think going back to the Iraq war, I think we did some early work on this question of a responsible handoff in Iraq, that essentially was adopted by the Bush administration, and then followed through in the Obama administration. I think CNAS also has done work early on, before people were sort of really clear about what the pivot or the rebalance to Asia really means. I did some early work framing what that should look like. And then again, on the technology and national security, we were one of the first, if not the first... or maybe one of the first think tanks to have a technology and national security program, to understand things like how AI was going to impact defense, and so forth. So I think those are all examples of either ahead of where the debate was, or the go to the pain. On the Iraq issue, lots of people were talking about Iraq, a lot of think tanks were very concerned that it was too divisive an issue for them to work on, whatever they came up with they would alienate the Republicans on their board, or the Democrats on the board. We said: "I'm not going to worry about that. This is like the issue, Americans are dying over there, we don't have a good strategy or way forward, we've got to... if any national security think tank worth their salt has to get in there and pull through and try to come up with some new ideas."

Michal Onderco: How do you know that these ideas catch on? How do you know that they sort of are picked up by the new administrations?

Michele Flournoy: Well, I think we always said it's not about finishing a report and throwing it over the transom. We really always tried to both engage stakeholders in our thinking as we were doing the work, but also, that we had a chance to brief them, or offered to brief them, or discuss it with them. So I think in many cases, we had direct conversations and feedback from people that the work was useful, or that was helping them in training policy.

Michal Onderco: When do you know that certain ideas are successful? Or where do you think that a certain initiative is successful? Because often, when I speak to representatives of civil society, they say: you can sort of see when the idea catch catches on, but whether it actually leads to any sort of positive impact. That's something that you sometimes you don't see until 20 years later.

Michele Flournoy: I think, first of all, you can sometimes see the terms of debate shifting. And suddenly an idea is catching on, I'll give you one that... there was some early work talking about how do we make Taiwan more of a porcupine, and now everybody talks about the porcupine strategy. It's just an idea that sort of catches on and people start using a lexicon that wasn't used before. and then you can also sometimes see your ideas put into policy practice, it becomes a NATO initiative or becomes a US initiative, or it becomes US policy. And so that's very direct, it's less frequent, I think, then simply being one of many factors that goes into a policy, but occasionally it does happen. I really think that in the US system, the think tanks are essential as ideas engines for government.

Michal Onderco: And I mean, when you look at the D.C. already mentioned that when you started CNAS, it was one of the many these, these think tanks. If you look at the think tank sphere in D.C., do you work with other think tanks? Or how would you position your institution visa vie, these other people, other organizations living in the ecosystem?

Michele Flournoy: So I think, yes, CNAS, because we're small, we've always been small, and we've chosen to stay small, so we can be more agile. It means that you have to take a more collaborative approach. And if you array the think tank, the think tanks in Washington can be arrayed on a political spectrum. So you have a cluster on the left, you have a cluster on the right, and then you have a few towards the middle and trying to be bipartisan or nonpartisan. And so there have been times when we've, chosen one from the right and one from the left and CNAS, and we've done some work on we in the run-up to elections, framing, having discussions about how issues would be framed, national security issues would be framed.

Michal Onderco: And what's the added value of sort of bringing in, for example, these different think tanks from the left and from the right?

Michele Flournoy: Well, I think for us to have a sustainable foreign policy and national security approach, we've got to have some bipartisan consensus. And we've seen, particularly when we went from the Obama administration of the Trump administration, how damaging it can be when you have wild swings in US policy. And so I think that's one reason. But it also elevates the debate, it's not everybody kind of looking at the issues in the same way, but you different perspectives. And from public education, and awareness perspective that can also be useful.

Michal Onderco: And do you find that, for example, the fact that you have had so much experience in the government helps to also position your views more prominently in the D.C. debate?

Michele Flournoy: I do think it helps to have an awareness of what's really useful to policymakers. Sometimes people on the outside have an idea of what's useful, and it's not useful. Or there's something really useful they could be doing, but they don't know what they don't know. So I do think having some practitioner expertise in the mix is very helpful.

Michal Onderco: I mean, there are also organizations like your former employer, ACA, in D.C., there are different universities. How do you see the role of these other organizations in the mix of civil society, when it comes to national security? Or maybe even concretely nuclear weapons in Washington?

Michele Flournoy: I think having that diverse and rich ecosystem is helpful. I mean, I think in academia you have people doing more fundamental research, that may or may not be directly policy relevant. But again, it's building intellectual capital. Something like ACA, a think tank that has a more narrow mission and focus, they have the ability to do much deeper work and consistent and persistent work in a given area to keep the focus there. And so I think that that's a very important role that they can play.

Michal Onderco: At this moment, one of the things that you already sort of suggested you said that nuclear weapons sort of went a little back to the background. Would you say that in the CNAS portfolio, at the moment, nuclear weapons are important, or prominent? or are they sort of an afterthought?

Michele Flournoy: I wouldn't say they're an afterthought. We don't have a dedicated nuclear weapons program, per se, but it is a threat that is woven through a number of different projects. So whether it's "how do we deal with Russia and Ukraine", and then there's thinking going on about how do we prevent a nuclear threat? What would we do in the case of a nuclear threat? And then on the Indo-Pacific side, I mean, deterring China includes deterring nuclear use, nuclear threats from China. So it's more of a threat, as opposed to separate, dedicated research.

Michal Onderco: And do you find that the fact that you see nuclear weapons as this intersectional issue, do you find that a strengthening your analysis? Or do you find that as something that sort of, is more complicating the issue?

Michele Flournoy: I think it's generally strengthening. I mean, I do think it needs to be complemented by people who go very deep on the more narrow question. "What do we understand Chinese nuclear doctrine and thinking to be and how is it changing?" That's not work that... well, I'm not running CNAS anymore, so I don't think work in that area, but it's work that we would be interested in and leverage from others to inform our broader work on Indo Pacific strategy.

Michal Onderco: So you have started working in the D.C. in the late cold war in the 80s. And if you look at D.C. today, of course, the topics may change, because there is no more evil empire, and so on and so forth. But have you also noticed the way how the think tank world works has changed over time? And what have become the biggest patterns of changes?

Michele Flournoy: I think, one is the greater degree of polarization in our politics, that there's less dialogue across the aisle or between the ends of the spectrum. That's one. Number two, I would say some of the think tanks have become more about convening, and media work, and less about analysis, research analysis, and publication. And so there's some that do almost no original research, but they

do a lot of events and a lot of commentary. So it's a kind of a departure from the traditional formula, if you will. I am trying to think of other examples...

Michal Onderco: Why do you think that balance is difficult? Or why do you think that balance is important between being the convener as opposed to being the thinker? Why do you think that an organization needs to be a thinker but also a good convener?

Michele Flournoy: I mean, again, it goes back to my belief that the highest value that think tanks can provide, is to come up with ideas and analysis, that the policymaker in government doesn't have time or the ability to come up with. When you are scheduled in 15- or 30-minute increments, you work 14 hours a day, six days a week, you're not going to be thinking great thoughts in the whitespace. You need others to be doing that. So that's if you're just convening and doing media commentary, there's some value in that. But it's not I don't think it I think it's missing this critical piece of developing new intellectual capital, which I think is very important.

Michal Onderco: I'm slowly moving towards the end of my questions, and I have two that I asked always at the end. So the first one is: where do you think the nuclear field is going to go in the next 50 years? And some people find this question to be easier to answer if I asked you this: do you think there will be nuclear weapons around in the next 50 years?

Michele Flournoy: Sadly, I think there will be nuclear weapons in the next 50 years. But I think we are going to... I think we're entering a period where there's likely to be some additional proliferation, starting with Iran, and then the Arab reaction to that. And I also think that we may see preemptive action, military action, because arms control was abandoned as an approach by previous administration, and seems very difficult to reconstruct. I think you could see a situation where use of force to set back a nuclear program. And I think with Russia in particular you have a great power that is going to be more active in bringing nuclear weapons to the fore of its strategy. And then lastly, I think you have this problem of multilateral deterrence. Like how do you deter both Russia and China and others at the same time? So I think, frankly, we need some new thinking, in this space. We need new people coming in and wrestling with the problems. When I first came into the field the my first publication was on the risk of accidental nuclear war, that was kind of a newer topic. I think, again, today, we're at a point where, beyond the nuclear orthodoxy, there are some new problems that need thinking through from new perspectives, because we haven't necessarily faced them before. So I'm hoping that there'll be a bit of a renaissance in this field.

Michal Onderco: So very often, when I speak to the different civil society representatives, they talk, every now and then about the topic of nuclear disarmament. So basically, the world without nuclear weapons. And you haven't mentioned that a single time. So, I want to ask you two questions.

Michele Flournoy: I did at the very beginning, when I came into the field.

Michal Onderco: Yes. So I want to ask you two questions. The first one is: do you think that the world without nuclear weapons would be more or less stable than the world where we are living today? And my second question is: what would we need in the world without nuclear weapons, for example, as a means to provide deterrence? Or how should we think about the world without nuclear weapons?

Michele Flournoy: I think that nuclear weapons are a product or symptom of the nature of international relations. And because the technology has been developed, and the know-how is there,

when I envision a world of no nuclear weapons, which would be wonderful at one level, I also believe that in a situation where conventional deterrence was unstable, or you had one power with huge conventional advantage over another, that the incentive to create a covert program and then break out, and [the motivation to] put nuclear weapons back on the table would be overwhelming in some cases. So it's hard to imagine a sort of permanent state of nuclear disarmament without a fundamental transformation of our international relations.

Michal Onderco: So that's the sign that it's difficult to imagine.

Michele Flournoy: Yes, difficult to imagine. Well, I mean, it's like Obama just to talk about it's an important vision and goal, and we should strive to get as close to it as possible. But it's hard to imagine it happening in our lifetimes.

Michal Onderco: Do you think that the war that is currently ongoing in Ukraine makes the dangerousness of nuclear weapons more visible? Or does it underline the case that we actually do need nuclear weapons for security in the world?

Michele Flournoy: I think for most people Putin's nuclear saber-rattling elevates a sense of danger, Iran's potential to break out elevates a sense of danger. The fact that you have Indian Pakistan with..., particularly Pakistan with nuclear weapons deployed on the Indian border, and they have fought three wars, and triggered by various things, but including terrorist attacks that could happen again, there are a whole host of situations that I think elevate the sense of nuclear danger. But in the face of that, I think there is an argument for maintaining a credible, safe, nuclear deterrent at the lowest possible levels that we believe to be stable.

Michal Onderco: So you don't agree with, for example, another former leading democratic foreign policy official, Anne-Marie Slaughter, who recently published an op-ed in which she said: "ban nuclear weapons now."

Michele Flournoy: I think it's a wonderful ambition, but I don't think it's a workable policy right now.

Michal Onderco: Well, thank you very much for finding the time to talk to me. I really appreciate that.

Michele Flournoy: I look forward to seeing the results of your research.