

Southern belle, steel magnolia

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Ambassador Swanee Hunt recounts her journey from the ballrooms of Texas to the battlefields of Bosnia.



Ambassador Swanee Hunt sits in the lobby of east Jerusalem's American Colony Hotel holding court. Indeed, her elegant style of dress and soft-spoken manner make her seem like a regal figure, as she greets the diplomats, religious figures and activists she has come to see during her visit to Israel. The purpose of her trip is anything but social, however. The former US ambassador to Austria, a major player in the American intervention in the Bosnian conflict, and, since 1997, director of the Women and Public Policy Program at the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University, Hunt is here to promote her most recent book, *This Was Not Our War*, a historical and social analysis of the Bosnian conflict from the perspective of 26 Bosnian women. She is also here to further the "Women Waging Peace" program, a global policy-oriented initiative to integrate women into the peace process through what she calls "inclusive security" - including women in public policy and social change. If our interview is anything to go by, Hunt practices personally what she preaches politically: As women pass by our table, she loops them in and includes them in the conversation. She asks as many questions as she answers, which makes for an intense, often personal, and thoroughly engaging dialogue.

Swanee Hunt, 55, was born and raised in Texas. Her father, H.L. Hunt, made his fortune as a wildcatter in the oil and gas industry. In the 1980s, he was listed among the richest man in the world. Her mother was a devout fundamentalist Christian. As a result, during her youth, Hunt spent 18 hours a week in church. But her rich and privileged life was not without pain, she reveals. Her parents were not married for the first eight years of her life, and as a girl, she wasn't considered a real link in her father's business "dynasty." Her soft Southern drawl and slight tilt of her head gives her the air of a Southern belle.

But she's more like a steel magnolia: insistent, persuasive - a hard-nosed negotiator who knows when to prod and push and when to cut loose. And it's clear she usually gets what she wants. She says she inherited this trait from her father. Though he was an arch-conservative and she is a die-hard feminist and progressive, she says she's basically a "wildcatter." "I just always have this sense that I'll get out and try, and I don't spend time wondering if something's really doable," she says matter-of-factly. This, perhaps, more than anything else, is responsible for her multi-faceted accomplishments, among them in the fields of music and art. The "Witness Cantata," a classical piece she composed as a memorial to victims of war, has been performed nine times in six cities. A photographer as well, some of her photographs illustrate her book, and she has had more than a dozen one-woman shows in five countries. She holds two masters degrees and a doctorate in theology.

Hunt is married to symphony conductor Charles Ansbacher - who is her second husband - and is the mother of three children, one of whom, she reveals without hesitation or shame, suffers from a serious mental illness. She says that when she was growing up, she was taught that as a woman, her role in

life was to support the men in her world. "I wanted to go to Radcliffe College after graduating high school," she recalls, "but my family didn't value education for women. Even working in the company wasn't an option for me." The confounding and conflicting combination of power and powerlessness - of influence and limitation - stayed with her for many years, she says. She married a church minister, raised children and renovated a large home. She spent eight years in a theological seminary and completed a PhD in divinity. This made her contemplate her family's wealth, she says. "Studying the teachings of St. Francis of Assisi about poverty, chastity and Christian social justice, I wondered if a Hunt could be a good Christian. I thought, maybe I'll give all my stock to my siblings, and I'll live a simple life. But I decided to go in the opposite direction and to get as much power as possible. Money and power do corrupt you and they are self-delusional. I decided to try to use them for good."

Having decided to come to terms with her affluence, she established Hunt Alternatives, a fund which has given away some \$50 million in the US for projects promoting mental health reform and combating poverty, teen pregnancy, child abuse and discrimination. She became a very hands-on donor. "When you give away half your money, you get interested in how to do it," she quips. Yet being a philanthropist, she says, was simply not enough. She wanted to turn her money into power. This is when she became involved in Bill Clinton's 1992 presidential campaign, co-chairing "Serious Women, Serious Issues, Serious Money" - a symposium widely considered to have been the first to have brought successful women from different backgrounds together to provide major financial backing for a national political campaign. According to promotional material, Hunt was the third-largest contributor to Clinton's campaign and she was rewarded with the ambassadorship to Austria.

But the US-Austrian relationship, Hunt acknowledges, "was fairly stable and didn't need much of my tending." At the same time, however, what she calls the "barbarous conflict in the Balkans" was escalating. Moved by the thousands of refugees who fled across the border into Austria with testimonies of grotesque atrocities they'd endured, Hunt ended up devoting a good quarter of her time to the Balkan issue, hosting negotiations and several international symposia to focus efforts on securing peace. Though she was a Clinton appointee, she was, and remains today, deeply critical of Clinton's "waffling" over whether to use force in Bosnia, and then in Kosovo. "The Americans convinced the Dutch that if they would commit peacekeepers as a tripwire around the UN-designated safe haven of Srebrenica, the United States would lead forces to come in with air support to stop a Serb onslaught," she says. "Instead, we let ourselves be held back by a 'dual key' arrangement, whereby NATO would not take action without the UN's affirmation." She is convinced that had the US and NATO intervened militarily at an earlier stage, at least 100,000 lives could have been saved. Once, she recalls, she sat up all night, crying out of frustration and rage at the unnecessary loss of life. "I'd always wondered who those policy-makers were - sitting at their big mahogany desks when Hitler was organizing and advancing, and all of a sudden I realized I was a policy-maker sitting at a big mahogany desk. And I've got to live with the fact that I wasn't able to change that," she says. "But I've decided to take the pain I've witnessed and the guilt I feel and do something constructive."

Concluding that women had been excluded both from the decisions that led to war and from the Dayton Peace talks that were supposed to bring an end to that war, Hunt became a specialist in the role of women in post-communist Europe and then in conflicts throughout the world. In July, 1997, she launched "Vital Voices: Women in Democracy," a conference of 320 women leaders in business, law and politics from 39 countries. The conference spawned a film documentary, as well as an ensuing State Department initiative. Since then, through "Women Waging Peace," Hunt has established a network of 500 key women in 40 conflict areas to connect them with policy-makers in their own and other countries. Does this mean that Hunt believes women are inherently more peaceful than men? "I don't know if it's nature or nurture and I don't really care. I can tell you that across the globe there are women organizing to try to prevent wars; to try to stop wars once they start; and to try to stabilize their countries immediately after the war." Asked about those women who send their children off to be

suicide bombers, she responds, "I wonder if that mother really said to her four-year-old, 'Honey, I want you to be a suicide bomber when you grow up.' I don't know at what point, if ever, she was happy that he killed himself and others. Maybe it's the only way she knows how to cope. And that is very sad."

In spite of her liberal stance, however, she is emphatic about not being a pacifist. Some women's groups have criticized her for advocating for the judicious use of force, as she did in Kosovo and Bosnia. "There are moments when military intervention is the least violent option," she says. What is the calculus? "The number of people who will be killed, and by whom," she answers directly. "Military intervention was the least violent option in Bosnia and should have been used earlier." She stops herself. "But isn't it a sad thing to say that killing is the least violent option?" she asks rhetorically. She also cautions against overdependence on the military. "It's been said that if the only tool you have is a hammer, then every problem looks like a nail. Well, if the only tool you have is an F-18, then that's the way the world will look, too." She is fiercely critical of current American foreign policy. In *This Was Not Our War*, she writes: "America could have solved most of the humanitarian crises in the world and become the friend of billions. Instead, legions of Muslims feel humiliated by the arrogance implicit in our go-it-alone foreign policy and have vowed revenge...The swagger in our current foreign policy leadership is not only unseemly but also dangerous." In spite of such strong opinions, Hunt is unwilling to discuss the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, other than to say, "You have wonderful strong women here, who are committed to peace. They know what to do," she defers.