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Virginia Russell Curley

Nebraska Methodist College, vrcurley@gmail.com

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Book Review

Virginia Russell Curley

***Pearls, Politics, & Power: How Women Can Win and Lead*, Madeleine M. Kunin, White River Junction, VT. 2008, Chelsea Green Publishing Company.**

Introduction

Pearls, Politics & Power: How Women Can Win and Lead is part memoir and part scholarly text. Written by the first female governor of Vermont, the text is based on interviews with women in politics with research to support the conclusions they draw. As a former Ambassador to her native Switzerland and current faculty member, Madeleine Kunin writes a succinct, if not sometimes truncated, account of the status of women in American politics, touching on the primary barriers to women's ascent to elected office. Consistent with the complex weaving of psychological and sociological factors that affect access to power, Kunin's text moves between raising questions and (sometimes) providing answers. Approached with this understanding, the book becomes an appropriate text for those who want a broad overview of the issues surrounding gender and politics and for women who want to enter politics.

Overview

Kunin's declaration in the Introduction is an impassioned plea for women to engage in politics: "We have been bystanders to history for too long. We have no more excuses; we are educated, we care, and we are ready to enter the arena" (p. ix). Yet the chapters that follow this declaration catalogue countless women who have been involved in American and world politics. What the reader discovers is that Kunin's plea is not just for *some* women to be active; it is a plea for the *majority* of women to view their role in politics as critical, rather than ancillary.

Likely born of Kunin's first-hand experience as a politician who broke through barriers, the sub-text of her book is as the title implies—pearls, politics, and power *do* belong together. When approaching the book from this perspective, Kunin's efforts to persuade the reader through academic research coupled with personal anecdotes are appreciated. Her goal is not so much to prove that there is a difference between how men and women leaders are perceived but rather to state such a difference as fact and offer reasons why this should encourage women to enter the political arena.

About the Author

Virginia Russell Curley is an Assistant Professor at Nebraska Methodist College. She oversees the core curriculum and undergraduate portfolio, in addition to teaching. She received her doctorate in Educational Administration from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Her research interests are leadership, power, and gender. Email: ginny.curley@methodistcollege.edu.

Kunin's priority is "to convince young people not only that the tools of social change are available but that they have to be utilized by more women if we are to change the policies that frustrate them" (p. xi).

Serving as a foundation for Kunin's work are the following assumptions:

- Women need to see politics as central to meeting social concerns not as a dirty, unfeminine arena;
- Women are diverse, however their concerns are more alike than different;
- We must educate the next generation of female leadership to embrace the power that is available rather than shrink before it;
- We must acknowledge that for as far as women have progressed, they are not there yet, especially when "Women make up 16 percent of the Congress, 16 percent of top corporate positions, and 16 percent of the lower houses of Parliaments worldwide," (p. xiii) yet comprise 51% of the world populations.

Kunin structures her book to explore these assumptions and challenge their conclusions.

Speaking from her own experience in politics, Kunin addresses the generalized feminine response to power: "Women are not supposed to want power, somewhat like sex. It's OK if they just receive it. So acculturated am I that it is not easy even now to say, 'Yes, I wanted power.'" (p. 2). Chapter 1 is an overview of Kunin's elected and appointed experiences in politics. Viewed as a memoir chapter, the reader can appreciate the unique role Kunin filled as she rose to the national and international political stage in the Clinton administration. No doubt this affiliation also influenced her endorsement of Hillary Rodham Clinton in her run for the presidency in 2008.

Taken as a memoir, it is easier to reconcile some of the discrepancies that surface as Kunin attempts to explain gender differences without making absolute distinctions. For example, in Chapter 1 she states, "Women tend to look at power differently than men. Rather than having *power over* others, they are more comfortable to *share power with* others." (pp. 2–3). Though this statement can be supported by some empirical evidence, it also reinforces the view that women are too timid to own the spotlight. Her last chapter is almost a direct affront to this stance when she states that women

have to stop apologizing for their desire to influence. Torn between these two perspectives, there is a need to reconcile a female preference for group work to accomplish tasks (a desired transformational leadership quality), and the inevitable charge that women need to be more assertive and independent in their leadership. Kunin herself seems unclear as to which end of the continuum best describes women.

To address at least a portion of this tension, Kunin offers a more nuanced explanation on women's lack of confidence. A brief reference to Carol Gilligan's work in Chapter 2 offers at least some explanation for why girls avoid claiming *the* leadership spotlight: "[G]irls between the ages of nine and eleven are confident and display strong leadership qualities. Once they reach adolescence likeability becomes more important and they tone their opinions down to maintain their friendships" (p. 34). This psychological desire to focus on relationships at the expense of expressing oneself is explained by Kunin as an unfortunate misinterpretation of politics: "The irony is that an elected official stands alone under a watchful public eye, but she can remain standing only if she is not alone. To continue to get elected, she has to surround herself with supporters who will vote for her and some who will work for her" (p. 34). Kunin's premise is valid as she encourages women not to abandon their desire for social networks but rather to expand those networks to be political networks. This explanation is one of the most insightful ways women can reconcile a desire for political power with a social expectation of collaborative work. Rather than considering politics as an ego-induced endeavor, Kunin encourages women to view it as a way to build collective action.

Throughout chapter 2, Kunin draws from her vast political experience to offer examples of the challenges women face in politics—from the classic "flip flop," "an accusation that hits women harder because of the gender stereotype that women can't make up their minds" (p.5)—to the balance between likeability and competence. These examples are relevant to Kunin's premise that women must mentor other women into politics. Hearing the stories from those who experienced politics decreases the odds that a woman will be unprepared to face obstacles. Kunin offers six hurdles that prevent women from pursuing a life in politics: raising money, giving up time, losing privacy, fear of risk taking, lack of confidence, and believing it is not the right time.

All of these barriers are logical and Kunin does a fine job pointing to at least a handful of reasons for the barriers. However, the brisk treatment they receive leaves the reader looking for more information. For example, when responding to the issue of wanting to balance time between family and career, which this author would argue is *the* key issue for why women do not aspire to higher office or higher rungs on the corporate ladder, Kunin resorts to two pages of relatively brisk advice and anecdotes from other women politicians. If these are truly the barriers to women in politics, Kunin needs to expand her treatment of these issues to offer a more nuanced explanation and advice.

Chapter 4 offers a theoretical and practical backdrop for Kunin's observations around women and leadership. The chapter includes a survey of critical leadership and women in leadership literature, citing important theorists and studies (i.e., Drucker, Burns, Helgesen, Rosener, *Catalyst*, Eagly and Carli). Beyond the theory, however, Kunin's ability to catalogue the status of women in a wide array of professional disciplines (military, corporations, media, higher education, sports, law, and the courts) serves an important purpose. Through personal vignettes corroborated by empirical evidence, it is clear that intended and unintended discrimination still exists in the 21st century. The vignettes are powerful and leave the reader wanting to know more about the women they catalogue.

The challenge Kunin faces in this book, like other writings on women and leadership, is how to address the nature of stereotypes. Stereotypes are psychological short-cuts that form about groups based on repeated patterns of behavior (see Fiske). Stereotypes are formed because members of groups *tend* to act in similar ways. Kunin suggests that women *tend* to pay attention to similar issues and work in a collaborative spirit: "Most women in public office agree that gender has an impact on their leadership style and on the policies they promote" (p. 80). However, stereotypes have limitations. Not every member of a group behaves in the same way. Not every woman in politics is a collaborator nor is she necessarily going to vote along a specific party line on an issue. Kunin quotes Senator McCaskill (D-MO) as wanting to resolve conflicts but also as saying, "I have to admit, for me, I love to win, and I hate to lose" (p. 80). Kunin is caught between making generalizations that stem from common characteristics and promoting diversity among women.

One such tension is the exploration of what holds women back from leadership positions. "Women are presented as not aggressive enough, lacking the self-confidence required for the job, and not being serious enough about their careers to climb the corporate ladder" (p. 60). As discussed in Chapter 4, these explanations are without merit. However, women identify these barriers in Chapter 2, and Kunin suggests that women need support to develop confidence and aspirations that require risk-taking. Rather than try to reconcile the internal struggles of women (e.g., balancing home and career) with the social expectations of women (which are sometimes synonymous with the internal struggles), Kunin moves ahead. The reality is that women and men have come to understand that the ability to provide for one's family economically and emotionally can be at odds.

Kunin shares a number of stories of how various female politicians have responded to the challenge of being both parent and politician. There are three female members of the House of Representatives who moved to Washington D.C. and share a house but return to their families on the weekends. Other female lawmakers opt to move their families to D.C.: "'It's the only way I can do this job and be a good mother to them,' said [Senator Mary] Landrieu, who has two young children" (pp. 108–109). Generation theory suggests that work-life balance is a priority for today's younger

workforce. By sharing stories from a variety of women who have responded in a variety of ways, Kunin avoids making a universal recommendation to women who seek to balance challenging careers with child-rearing. Indicative of the complexity of the issue, Kunin's examples serve more as a springboard for discussion than a boiler plate for resolution. This is perhaps why the book periodically strays from a consistent answer to the question of specific male and female differences in leadership style; the answer varies dependent upon the question that is asked.

In the context of the 2008 Presidential election, Kunin's fifth chapter focuses on how women affect policy development with the bold title: "Yes, Gender Does Make a Difference." Kunin enjoys an exciting year in which to publish the book—Nancy Pelosi was named Speaker of the House, Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton was in the final race for the Democratic Presidential Nomination, and Alaska Governor Sarah Palin was named Republican Senator John McCain's Vice Presidential candidate. Kunin's enthusiasm for the women is evident as she details their ascent to higher offices.

In addition to their history, the chapter explores a number of politicians' reasons for joining politics, as well as how they lead. The chapter closes with research that states "[a] majority of female and male legislators agree that the increased presence of women made a difference [among other things] 'in the extent to which the economically disadvantaged have access to legislatures and the extent to which legislatures are sympathetic to the concerns of racial and ethnic minority groups'" (p. 91). This conclusion supports Kunin's thesis that women must get involved in politics. There will be a difference in what laws are enacted and how the community is affected if women are proportionally represented in legislative and executive offices.

Almost as a contradiction to her own thesis, however, Kunin concludes the chapter with a quick reference to Deborah Rhode's work on *The Difference "Difference" Makes*:

Women did not have a distinctive leadership style and women managers, judges, and politicians had not made a significant difference, except for issues of particular concern to women. She noted that, "Some of the worst voting records on women's rights belong to women" (p. 92).

Though Kunin follows this statement with a general nod to the fact that not all women agree on all issues, she does not engage in an analysis of how Rhode's conclusion aligns with (or contradicts) her own conclusions.

Kunin shares many stories of women who have "made it" to the political table. Chapter 7 is an overview of female world leaders. In this chapter as well, Kunin says she is unable to draw any conclusive generalizations about women leaders, yet she stops short of an analysis as to why this might be. Again, the conclusion of no consistent patterns in female leadership leaves her overall position that we need more women in leadership unresolved.

Regardless, the reality of electing women to office is that it serves as a model for young women. When the women in Chapter 6 discuss their time away from their children, it is clear there is sacrifice involved in being in that level of office (not different from a father's sacrifice, but a sacrifice nonetheless). Women in Chapter 7 talk about the scrutiny of female politicians. "[T]hey [the media] scrutinize your private life, look at your clothes and your hairstyle, that's to say, things that no one evaluates in a man, and in reality they demand more from a woman in politics than a man'" (p. 123). Seeing a woman in elected office—even with the scrutiny—sends an important message to young women around the world. "For the first time, they felt represented." (p. 123).

Chapter 8 provides the most in terms of specific challenges female politicians must consider. Kunin recounts the story about when she was invited to present at a forum for female Democratic gubernatorial candidates in 2007—a gathering that had not been available when Kunin first ran for governor in 1982. The take-away lessons from that conference were three-fold: women face the dilemma of needing to be both an insider (who knows how to work within the system) and an outsider (who will clean up the corruption of politics); women must balance the stereotypical description of being consensus builders with the expectation of making difficult decisions; and finally, women walk a line between standing up for the "soft issues" of education, healthcare and childcare while also being in command of the "hard issues" of taxes, crime, and employment.

Kunin weaves together a series of vignettes from various female politicians to add credence to the challenges identified. Notably, Kathleen Sebelius (D-KS) and Janet Napolitano (D-AZ) are featured prominently in this chapter as they share their experiences addressing the challenges of being women in elected office. Due to their recent exposure as potential running mates and cabinet members in president-elect Barack Obama's administration, their words take on a heightened sense of relevance as political leaders who are women. Kunin's final sentence in the chapter summarizes its message: "The greater the number [of women in politics], the fewer the stereotypes until one day, the same expectations will exist for women as for men" (p. 147). Filled with fascinating stories, the chapter would benefit from expansion as there are many more stories to tell about how women respond to the competing demands of strong and sensitive leadership.

Chapter 9 is especially interesting as it was written before Barack Obama received the Democratic Party's nomination for president. Kunin begins with a brief history lesson on women who have run for president, with special attention paid to Carol Moseley Braun, the first (and only) African-American woman elected to a U.S. Senate seat. Braun's first-person account of how race and gender play in American politics is more optimistic than pessimistic as she surmises, "I saw how people reacted and listened to what I had to say. The public is way ahead of the political class on a lot of this stuff" (p. 151). Braun's assessment is then used as a segue

to Kunin's appraisal of Hillary Rodham Clinton's race for the presidency in 2008.

Again, Kunin weaves personal accounts from political analysts and politicians with data collected from polls to paint the awkward portrait of American politics when Democratic candidates represented "the other" in American politics. Much of Kunin's review focuses on the uneasy relationship between female politicians and female voters. One of the most succinct and insightful comments comes from Ellen Malcolm, founder of Emily's List. "I think some of us have a very uncomfortable relationship with power. We want women to have power in the abstract, but when we see it up close and personal it makes us uncomfortable" (p. 156).

Though her support for Clinton is stated outright, Kunin's ability to address the most common conjectures about women in politics is crystallized in this chapter. Supported by academic research from *Catalyst*, Deborah Tannen, and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, as well as political reports from such reputable sources as *The Nation* and Cokie Roberts, Kunin weaves together an argument that is, in essence, the case study for the premise of the entire book: women in politics face a double bind.

The irony is that Senator Clinton is the first woman to be qualified for the presidency, to have the requisite experience, intelligence, and judgment to be 'presidential'; but having reached this threshold, she is considered by some to be too qualified, too scripted, too 'same old,' or too much of a politician, carrying the baggage the word implies (p. 165). Hillary Clinton was interviewed by Kunin and the various transcripts of their conversations support Kunin's premise and offer a glimpse into the reality for any politician. "Being a woman is part of who I am as a mother, wife, daughter, senator, and now candidate for president. I just try to be myself. . . . I really think all of us—women and men—have to strive to do the best we can in our families, careers, and lives" (p. 174). More often than not, true to her campaign as well, Clinton's comments focus on the universal desires of prosperity over the unique desires of women.

It is unfortunate that *Pearls, Politics and Power* went to press before Alaska Governor Sarah Palin entered the race as John McCain's running mate and before Barack Obama won the Democratic nomination. Palin's nomination ignited a new firestorm of commentary on both the role of women in politics and the essence of the interests of women. Considered opposites in their platforms, Clinton and Palin represented very different pictures of women in American politics. If anything, their presence in the same race solidified some of Kunin's premises that women in politics are still a novelty—one that increases the odds that at least some of the commentary will focus on clothing, childrearing and likeability over issues and ability to lead.

Chapters 10 and 11 are encyclopedias of funds that support women in politics and Kunin's suggestions for how to increase the number of women in elected office. For those who are interested in the book as a reference guide, these chapters, along with chapter 8, serve that purpose well.

Conclusion

Pearls, Politics & Power is written in a manner that is appropriate for women considering elected office and for those interested in how gender affects ability to lead. Supported by well-documented scholarship, Kunin balances academic text and personal memoir. Despite occasional repetition of stories, the relatively short length is important. For academics looking for more depth, the endnotes become a valuable resource. For the casual reader, the frequent use of narrative engages the reader on a personal level. For women in leadership, the book is a verification of lived experience and an opportunity to consider a larger implication for the need to engage on a political level. Kunin's treatment of the complex history of women in politics and her advice for those considering office is concise. The text is a helpful reference for those who wish to encourage young women, as well as those who need support for their insistence that women should be represented in politics. Kunin's unique experiences make her particularly well-suited to write this book. She serves as an inspiration to those who know that pearls, politics and power should not be considered isolated realities.

Related Articles that May be of Interest to Readers:

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