



Bio: **Christine Todd Whitman** is the President of The Whitman Strategy Group (WSG), a consulting firm that specializes in energy and environmental issues.

She was the 50th Governor of the State of New Jersey, serving as its first woman governor from 1994 until 2001. She was the first candidate to ever beat an incumbent in New Jersey. Governor Whitman served in the cabinet of President George W. Bush as Administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency from January of 2001 until June of 2003.

She is the author of a New York Times best seller, “It’s My Party, Too”, which was published in January of 2005 and released in paperback in March 2006.

An Interview with Christine Todd Whitman

Conducted by Leadership Scholar Justine Del Gaudio, Class of 2010

Edited by Pilar Timpane

Justine Del Gaudio: One of the things I read a lot about you in Mary Hartman’s book, *Talking Leadership*, is your upbringing. I was curious as to how your experiences as a child shaped where you are today.

Christine Todd Whitman: It had a huge impact. I was the youngest of four but I was younger by eight years, so by the time I got here my parents were tired. I got to experience a lot of things that my siblings didn’t. I was taken around by my parents to a number of events that they did and I was taken to the polls to vote and also to count votes at night. I was also a part of their dinner conversation because I was there alone and the others had all gone. It helped to form in me an understanding of the issues as they affect us in our communities and our daily lives. It helped me want to be a part of the decision-making process that went on.

JD: Did you feel that you were always encouraged to follow this path?

CTW: My parents didn’t pick out a career for me in any way, but they certainly encouraged me to be anything that I wanted to be. My dad had pretty high standards about how you did things. If you were going to do something, you did it well. You didn’t do a second-class job, ever. But I picked up from them their great commitment to government. Neither one of them were in government service per se, but politics and government being part of a civic duty. You had a way to give back to the country and the community.

JD: How was college for you? Do you feel it shaped or changed where you decided to go or was it a moment when you decided what you wanted to do?

CTW: Well, I knew I wanted to do something in policy. That was what interested me. So, at college at Wheaton, I realized that I had probably done as much as most of the professors in domestic politics. I didn't know a lot about international politics. I decided to major in international government with a minor in history. I lived abroad as a child; we traveled abroad a lot. So, I had an interest anyway in international affairs. Particularly at that point, the focus was on Eastern Europe but I also decided that for my honors major I would do my thesis on Nigerian constitution development because I knew nothing about that part of the world and I wanted to have more of a focus on it and a better understanding.

Wheaton allowed me to grow and expand my horizons and to see all the things that you could do not only domestically but internationally as well.

JD: How did you view yourself on the political scale at a young age? Did you always tend to lean one way? Or did it change for you?

CTW: Well, I was a Republican. I was brought up in a Republican household and then as most teenagers do, I think, when you hit about thirteen, you say, "I don't want to do anything my parents did." I took a step back and I said, "Am I just a Republican because of my parents or do I believe in it?" The Republican Party that I grew up with is much different than the one of today. When I was growing up it was about respecting the individual by trying to give them the tools to solve their own problems and have the government stay out of their lives to the extent possible and not be involved in everything. Keep taxes low but understand that you couldn't do that in a vacuum. So, you kept spending low, balanced budgets, engaged foreign policy, security at home, respect for the shared environment and that was it. Not all these litmus tests we have today on social issues. None of that was part of the discussion back then.

JD: So, looking from then to now, how do you feel that the Republican Party tends to [view] issues that have to do in particular with women? Is there a difference?

CTW: There is a big difference. While I don't know if you can say [women] are respected more in the Democratic Party than the Republican Party, I certainly never felt that there was any hold back to women. I saw strong role models in my mother and grandmother, both of whom have been very, very involved.

The Republican Party at that point didn't try to get in and control women's lives to the point that it does today. The fringes of the Republican Party seem to have been primarily captured by the far right and they are defining the party out of Washington. When you get out into the states and the localities, that's not what you find, and that's not who Republicans are. It's a vast change from what it was before. Not so much necessarily towards women because obviously they have promoted a lot of women. There are a number of women within Congress that are Republican. We have had a lot of Republican governors and do today, but because of the social issues that

tend to be more personal to women, the party has taken some pretty hard line stances on these issues.

JD: Do you feel like that needs to change?

CTW: I think it has to change. If the party wants to be relevant, it has to change. In the last presidential cycle, you had for John McCain over two million more self-identified Christian pro-life Republicans who voted than voted for George Bush in his re-election. So, that tells you that they got the base out. And we [still] got our heads handed to us. The message ought to be, it is nice to have the base, but you need more. That far-right base is not enough to get you elected. We are now at numbers in the Congress both in the House and the Senate that almost render the party irrelevant. We're not quite there yet but we are getting there very fast. My feeling is if we stick to this rigid ideological litmus test that seems to be imposed at the national level, we will fast become a non-party.

The Democratic Party has gone very far to the left and there are a lot of people now that I talk to, particularly with this administration, that are feeling very uncomfortable — some of the more extreme approaches to health care, some of the tax policy changes they are talking about, making enemies of groups, which is something that Republicans unfortunately have done and now to see the Democrats doing that. You are evil if you are in banking, if you are on Wall Street. Those have been the generators of wealth. Do they need to be reformed? Yes. But are they the enemy? No. We need to watch our language on both sides because language shapes behavior and when you are communicating a message of definitives, it makes it very hard to compromise and get along with other people and that is dangerous.

I think this country very much needs a vibrant two-party system. It's dangerous when you have all of the control in the hands of one party. I say that having been a governor that had both houses Republican, and I think it would have been much healthier had one house been in the hands of the Democrats.

JD: What makes you weary about that radical adherence to one side of the political spectrum?

CTW: Because if you live in the real world, you know that there are very few issues that are all black or all white. Nobody is all right, nobody is all wrong. And this is a very diverse country; this is a very diverse state. We have five climate zones in this state. We have as diverse a population as you could possibly get. You are not going to get people who all think the same way on every subject. What you want are people who will analyze each subject and bring to bear a basic philosophy.

When I was growing up, I asked my father what defined a party. He said they were like umbrellas, that you had that central core set of shared beliefs, which I outlined to you before, and that is the base, that is the handle of the umbrella. Then you had the ribs that represented

different issues, where people would diverge, but they held up the canopy and everybody could live underneath that. It meant that you could be a moderate, a Liberal, a Conservative and still be a Republican. And when people ask me, “What are you?” I tell them, “Tell me the issue, I’ll tell you where I am, and you decide.”

Fiscally, I was a very conservative governor. Socially, I am a very moderate person. So, to me, that’s where most of the world is. People think, and they understand that it is hard to find any issue where there is just one right or wrong. I mean, you can find them. Certainly, you look back at Hitler and you know that was wrong. Genocide is just plain wrong. The Holocaust was wrong. No two ways about it, no way to equivocate on that. But the issues that we are talking about are not like that.

JD: When you were governor, how do you feel you handled that moderate standpoint? What were some things that were important to you as governor and how do you feel you addressed them?

CTW: Whether it was about welfare reform or health insurance, it was about building coalitions. I did as much work on insurance reform with the Democrats as I did with the Republicans. Actually, it was the Democrats that got us votes at the end of the day.

There were some issues where you took a stand and you just said you wouldn’t change. For me, that came in my re-election year when partial birth abortion was an issue and [former] President [Bill] Clinton had vetoed a bill on partial birth abortion and kicked it back to the states and the legislature. They started writing a bill, which I knew was unconstitutional, and I couldn’t sign it. I had sworn an oath to uphold the Constitution and that calls for protection of the life and health of the mother. I actually offered a bill that put some restrictions on third trimester abortions, but it wasn’t what they wanted. It wasn’t pure enough, it wasn’t hard enough, it wasn’t absolute enough. So, they went ahead, wrote their own bill, and sent it to me. And I used the power of the governor of New Jersey on something called a conditional veto, which means that within any piece of legislation, as long as I stay within the perimeters of the intent of the bill, the governor can rewrite it, which I did to make their bill constitutional, and sent it back to them. They overrode me. I think their thinking was that I wouldn’t conditionally veto it because it was a re-election year and that was going to be bad for me, but I just couldn’t compromise on that.

On other issues, to my mind, compromise isn’t a dirty word. If you are moving an agenda forward, if you are making progress that hasn’t been made before, if you don’t get all the way there, if you don’t get everything you want, that’s not failure as long as you’re moving things forward. If I can’t get the whole loaf, half the loaf is better than none.

JD: Can you think of a time in your career where you think that your gender hindered you? Or if there is a particular situation you could talk about ...

CTW: When I ran for governor, I ran on a platform for cutting taxes and when we got into office and I started to put that into place, there was a lot of talk that my husband must have been behind the tax plan and writing things because I couldn't have done it. That was very frustrating. So, what we did is that he never came to Trenton. He just never came around and I kind of ran into that early on when I was a freeholder, I could see they took one look at this young [woman], 'cause I was in my thirties then, and they were, Oh yeah right! But as soon as they figured out that I signed the checks they came around pretty fast.

JD: How does that make you feel?

CTW: They shouldn't do it. But we have allowed them to do it, and I think part of that is because if you ask a man to take on something that they have never done before where they have no background they say, Sure, bring it on. They have absolute confidence and they have been given that by society.

Women, when you ask them to take on something they have never done before, they tend to say, Now, wait a minute, isn't there someone who could do this better? We have all kinds of hesitation and we have to start getting over that.

And have some faith in your ability to learn on the job and have some faith in your common sense, because that will take you a long way. You don't have to know all the ins and outs of every specific subject to be involved in whatever the project is or the assignment. But you have to know where to go to get the answers; you have to be confident that you can learn about it and that you will be able to pick out the right people to ask the questions and that you'll listen.

JD: One of the things I noticed you mentioned in the interview with Dr. Hartman is how no one paid attention to the fact that you beat the incumbent, but only that you were the first woman [governor of New Jersey]. How do you feel about that now?

CTW: Well, they still introduce me as the first woman governor, and it's true. There is no denying that. But they kind of overlook that no incumbent governor had ever been beaten in a general election. And so I kind of want to raise my hand every time and say, "Wait a minute, you are giving recognition to the part that I had nothing to do with. I happened to come out female!"

If I were a man, there would have been a lot of emphasis on [beating the incumbent] because that really was much more reflective of what I was able to bring to the table than the woman part of it — that just was. But the other should have been more of an indicator to people of the kind of governor I could be.

JD: Do you feel like that will ever change within our society?

CTW: It has been changing. Things are much better. It's somewhat ironic if you think about it that we have an African-American president before we have had a woman president. Women are more than 50 percent of the population.

JD: Do you feel like a lot of your work has given you the power to reach out and empower women?

CTW: Well, every position I have had I've tried to empower women by appointing women. As governor, it was the first female chief of staff, first woman attorney general, first woman who was chief justice to our state Supreme Court and then a whole lot of women to other positions that were policy-making that have traditionally been held by men. It wasn't because they were women, but because they had been very well qualified. But I did want to have women there as well, women and minorities. I tried to expand that because today's problems — and in this world, the problems are so complex and so difficult that there is no one group that has all the answers — and white males do not have all the answers!

You need to have a more diverse set of life experiences, more diverse backgrounds at the decision-making table.

Then, the *Whitman Leadership and Excellence* series started while I was governor to encourage women who want to run or get involved in public policy. The series was started with my name and I talk every year when we have classes, and we are training and giving them the exposure they need and the network they need to do what they want to do. We show them that they can be involved in their community. I talk to women's groups a lot, at colleges and things like that as well.

JD: Is there a big particular reason why you think it is important to have women involved and to have some kind of a presence in politics?

CTW: Aside from the fact that it affects our everyday lives? We do have a different set of life experiences, we do have a different way of looking at issues, we do have different ways of problem solving. Once you start to generalize you always find the exception to the rule, but in general women are better at multitasking than men. We tend to be less possessive of our ideas. If a man offers an idea at a table, whether it's in the business sense or on a political issue, that's how they want it done, and they will fight tooth and nail to get it exactly as they put it forward. But when a woman puts forward an idea, to her it's more important getting something done on the idea. How it actually looks at the end of the day isn't quite as important as getting some action in that area so we are more willing to compromise, which many people say is a weakness. I would argue it's common sense, and it actually takes a lot of strength to give up on some of the things that you care about in order to get the bigger picture.