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Steven Spielberg: Oprah would make a brilliant president and I will back her

Calling her the ‘ambassador of empathy’, The Post director endorses Winfrey and says America needs ‘a mindful, empathetic human being in the White House’

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The undeclared but burgeoning campaign to elect Oprah Winfrey the next president of the United States has received another boost, with the full-throated backing of one of Hollywood’s biggest figures: Steven Spielberg.

“I think Oprah Winfrey would make an absolutely brilliant president,” the Oscar-winning director told the Guardian on Thursday. Spielberg, in London to promote his new movie *The Post*, said: “If she declares, I will back her.”



Barnstorming ... Oprah Winfrey at the Golden Globes. Photograph: Paul Drinkwater/AP

Speculation about a Winfrey presidential run in 2020 took off following Sunday’s Golden Globes awards ceremony, where the TV host and impresario delivered a barnstorming and intensely political speech. Afterwards her partner, Stedman Graham, told the Los Angeles Times: “It’s up to the people. She would absolutely do it.”

Spielberg, widely acclaimed as the most commercially successful film-maker in cinema history, was effusive in his praise: “She is crackerjack on the money on women’s issues and I call her the ambassador of empathy. And our country could use a dose of empathy right now.”

Spielberg, who directed Winfrey in his 1985 film *The Color Purple*, said the actor-turned-TV-mogul would be a unifying figure. “She’s been on the air for 35 years with all kinds of social outreach, building bridges between different ideologies and different points of view.”

Asked if she has the skill set to be president, he replied, “Does our current president have the skill set to be president?”

Pressed on whether Democrats should look to replace Donald Trump with a candidate with governing experience rather than another TV celebrity, Spielberg said: “I think we need a mindful, empathetic human being in the White House who understands people and puts people ahead of their own ideas of power and self-aggrandisement – and I think Oprah has already proved her capacity for selflessness.”

He noted that previous presidents had often arrived in office having fulfilled no role comparable to the US presidency. “I think she’ll learn on the job the same way Bill Clinton learned – a former governor of Arkansas – or Barack Obama, a junior senator, learned on the job. I’d much rather go for someone like Oprah Winfrey than a career politician.”

Asked if his endorsement was serious, Spielberg said it was and that he’d “like the next president to be a president of the people”.

Spielberg was speaking ahead of a press conference in London for *The Post*, at which the film’s star Meryl Streep said Winfrey talked like a presidential candidate should talk, and that she had the voice of a leader. “Whether she is leading us to the candidate we need or whether she herself is a candidate, she sets the bar pretty high on campaign talk.”

Asked about the #MeToo and Time’s Up movements Streep said we were seeing a “global seismic change”. She said: “As a movement it is pretty interesting to be involved because there isn’t a leadership hierarchy, we don’t know who the top dog is. We have a hive, it is like a hive of bees, there are more and more coming in. Everybody is making honey, everybody is doing the good work.

“It is a moving thing and that’s good because it needs to fly, it needs to alight on many different industries, many different enterprises ... government, military, the church. The inequities and the imbalance of power isn’t just in Hollywood. The exploitation of women, their labour and their reticence to come forward... that goes right through societies, not just in the United States.

“It is a growing thing and the most heartening thing for me is that it doesn’t feel like a one-off, I don’t think we’ll go backwards.”

Streep added that the movie industry, of course, needed to be diverse; a sentiment echoed by her co-star Tom Hanks who said, when it came to diversity, “television kicks movies’ ass”. “In television, which is probably better than it has ever been ... women are much better represented than they are in motion pictures.”

Hanks said he had worked with women directors such as Penny Marshall and Nora Ephron. “I’m of the generation who, frankly, didn’t give too much of a shit about the gender of the person in charge.”

The Post, which tells the story of the 1971 battle by the Washington Post to publish the Pentagon Papers – detailing decades of US government dishonesty over the war in Vietnam – and which champions the role of the press, is also set to be seen as a coded attack on the Trump administration, which has made no secret of its hostility to what it calls “the fake news media.”

The Guardian’s full interview with Steven Spielberg will appear next week.