

Making a Difference

An Interview with Valerie B. Jarrett,
Senior Advisor to President Barack Obama, The White House

EDITORS' NOTE Valerie Jarrett serves as Senior Advisor to the President. She also oversees the Offices of Public Engagement and Intergovernmental Affairs, and chairs the White House Council on Women and Girls. Prior to joining the Obama Administration, she was the Chief Executive Officer of The Habitat Company. She also served as Co-Chair of the Obama-Biden Presidential Transition Team, and Senior Advisor to Obama's presidential campaign. Jarrett has held positions in both the public and private sector, including as Chairman of the Chicago Transit Board, the Commissioner of Planning and Development for the City of Chicago, and Deputy Chief of Staff for Mayor Richard M. Daley. She also practiced law with two private law firms. Jarrett additionally served as Chairman of the Board of the Chicago Stock Exchange, Director of the Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago, Chairman of the University of Chicago Medical Center Board of Trustees, Vice Chairman of the Board of Trustees of the University of Chicago, and a member of board of the USG Corporation and Navigant Consulting. She received her B.A. from Stanford University and her J.D. from the University of Michigan Law School.



Valerie B. Jarrett

How did you approach the development of that engagement?

We began by introducing ourselves as early as the first day in office, when the President and First Lady had an open house at the White House. They invited so many different people in to the White House – military personnel, business leaders, civic leaders, local elected officials, people who work in nonprofits and advocacy groups, etc. The intent was to signal that this is the people's house, and they should feel welcome and comfortable here.

We convene a wide range of stakeholders around issues of interest, from immigration to equal pay for women to focusing on how to strengthen the economy to education – every issue you can imagine. We invite people from around the country who are interested in those issues to attend and share their thoughts.

We do a lot of homework to find out who has demonstrated the ability to have mastered a particular area, and we are very eager to bring that knowledge in to the White House whenever possible. We share best practices and welcome great ideas, and we do the same with mayors, governors, and state legislators who have their ears to the ground in their local communities. Mayors and governors are generally only interested in what's in the best interests of the people they represent – their short-term political interests are aligned more directly with the interests of the constituency.

Are you optimistic that we can break through the gridlock in Washington?

I am, because we have made a great deal of progress already. When the President took office, we were in the deepest recession since the Great Depression, our financial institutions were on the verge of collapse, the global economy was hanging on by a thread, we had a housing crisis, and our automobile industry was on the brink of completely dissolving.

Five years later, we have had over 45 straight months of private sector job growth – nearly eight million jobs created, with over half a million jobs created in manufacturing. The automobile industry is thriving in the U.S., and our U.S. companies are global leaders again. Our unemployment rate has also come down.

We still have a long way to go, but we're

moving in the right direction. We have encountered challenges along the way, but what we have tried to demonstrate over the arc of the President's first five years is a consistent determination to persevere.

It takes that kind of resilience and commitment to make progress in this town. Frustration goes along with the job description, but we are optimists, and the rewards for hard work and determination are great.

Part of our goal is to make sure we get out of Washington frequently to see the success stories, and meet with people who are working with community organizations, religious institutions, block clubs or chambers of commerce. The people's voices are the voices that matter most.

You also Chair the White House Council on Women and Girls. Can you talk about how that function has evolved?

When the President first announced the creation of the Council, the intent was to make sure that with every policy we adopt, every program we put in place, and every piece of legislation we support, we are working to improve the quality of life for women and girls.

He wanted empowerment of women and girls to be a central part of his strategy in the administration, and not an afterthought. The thought was to include every agency in the federal government on the council so that it would be top of mind – and this is what has happened.

Whether it's focusing on how to encourage young girls to go into courses in STEM so they'll have futures in growth industries or combatting sexual assault on campuses, the goal is to improve the quality of life for women and girls in a comprehensive, holistic way at the federal level. We look to share best practices among different agencies and to figure out how to leverage multiple agencies to attack a problem more comprehensively.

And to take it one step further, we work within the council to engage more broadly, and leverage what the federal government can do with the private sector to advance our goals.

For example, there are many private companies now working with high schools and community colleges to design curricula in such a way that as young people finish their coursework, they are prepared for a

job at the other end, and young girls are able to participate in those early internship programs so they can understand what is possible.

Have you seen women progress at senior levels in government and business?

There are some important metrics that show we're moving in the right direction. Women now make up half of the workforce; they're graduating from college at a slightly higher rate than men, and they're graduating from graduate school at an even higher rate.

Two-thirds of all households now have a single woman head of household or two adult heads of household, so the contribution of women to the workforce is more important than ever.

As the President says, this is no longer a women's issue; it's a family issue, a societal issue, and a national issue.

The contribution that women are making is substantial, and we have to continue creating a business climate for the 21st century that has women playing a substantial role.

Women are not where I would like them to be in business nor in politics, but the metrics are moving in the right direction because of our level of involvement primarily in education, which is the pipeline.

This progress is part of the reason why the President emphasizes that we should make sure all young people have an opportunity for early childhood education; so regardless of your zip code, you start out on the same level. What we have to do is make sure our girls are motivated, and have role models to look to throughout their education and careers.

The President wants us to make those investments that will create the kind of environment where the American dream is within reach to anyone who wants to roll up his or her sleeves, and work hard.

Wherever we find inequality, we're trying to level that playing field, and that applies to young girls, people of color – anyone who has historically not had access to that level playing field.

Are you concerned that we're going to be able to attract the leaders to public service that we need?

Young people do have a hunger for public service. One of the consequences of the economic crisis is that people who might have traditionally gone into the private sector started to look at government. Once they joined up, they fell in love with it and realized it was a calling.

Young people are often motivated by a desire to give back – they're still young enough to be idealistic and believe they can change the world, and indeed they can.

How does the administration value its relationship with the business community?

The President knows that the long-term sustainable growth of jobs in our country rests with the private sector. When he first came into office, he had to take bold steps to



Valerie Jarrett at work with President Obama in the Oval Office.

make sure that he saved us from going into a depression.

It was important for us to pass Dodd-Frank to make sure we never ended up in a situation again where the taxpayers in the U.S. had to bail out our banks..

When I look at the level of engagement in the business community today, and the wide range of important initiatives we are partnering together on, it's an indication of a strong alignment of interest, and hard work we have done together over the years

The President's growth agenda, including his desire to invest in education, science, technology, and infrastructure; his commitment to immigration reform; his emphasis on negotiating additional trade agreements; his commitment to exports, tax reform, and patent reform; the priority that he's given to his new Secretary of Commerce to jump-start our SelectUSA initiative, which is designed to encourage both domestic and foreign investment in the U.S. – these initiatives are completely aligned with the business community.

It's clear we have progressed toward engaging the business community. In 2011, when we were going through the first debt ceiling crisis, the business community didn't work with us because they thought Congress would work it out. Since then, there hasn't been a business leader who we have called who hasn't gotten involved.

So many supported a balanced approach to tackling our fiscal challenges, and understood it would be important to raise tax rates at a time when Republicans in Congress weren't supportive. The majority of the business community even said, we're willing to pay a higher tax rate as part of an overall strategy to get our fiscal house in order, and continue to invest in a growth agenda.

In 2013, during the government shut-down, as we approached the debt ceiling

again, the business community again rolled up their sleeves, got engaged, and made the case to their employees, their customers, and their communities – and that message was ultimately heard by Congress.

This is a successful partnership – one where people are willing to get involved in their democracy and assume responsibility for making our country great.

Despite the commitment to improving the education system, K through 12 remains broken. Where will the fix come from?

Our efforts in this critical space need to be based on a public/private partnership. We have a responsibility in the public sector to make sure our programs are aligned in order to ensure that young people are getting the best possible education, and we should be creating incentives for success.

It's more important than ever as the federal government is tightening its belt to make sure we have partners in the private sector who will join our growth agenda. The President has been talking about how to leverage our strengths, lift up best practices, and make sure the U.S. remains globally competitive. He strongly believes that an important pillar in that competition is high-quality affordable education.

How do you handle the stress of such a high-pressure position?

I don't allow myself to be distracted by the noise and I remain focused on what is good for the American people. We have made mistakes, but we have had countless success, and we learn from both.

Do you ever appreciate the successes you have achieved?

I am so grateful to be here, serving the American people every single day. There is not enough time in the day to think too much about successes, but this is definitely the best job I'll ever have. ●