

President Richard Nixon: The Unlikely Champion of Advancing Equality for Women

By: Barbara Hackman Franklin

When I first came to Washington, D.C. to work in the White House of President Richard Nixon almost 40 years ago, you could count the number of women in the House and Senate on your two hands plus one toe. And, you wouldn't have needed any additional digits for the women sitting on the Supreme Court or in the President's Cabinet – because there weren't any.

Then, in the early 1970s, thanks to the pioneering efforts of "*A Few Good Women...*" and the leadership of the President, it all began to change.

In January 1969, Richard Nixon took the oath of office as President. At one of President Nixon's early press conferences, Ms. Vera Glaser stood amid a forest of male colleagues, raised her strong, clear voice, and asked:

"Mr. President, since you've been inaugurated, you have made approximately 200 presidential appointments, and only three of them have gone to women. Can we expect some more equitable recognition of women's abilities, or are we going to remain the lost sex?"

The President seemed surprised, but he agreed: "We'll have to do something about that." It was a promise he kept.

President Nixon's pledge to Ms. Glaser triggered a chain of events that led to the appointment of a White House Task Force on Women's Rights and Responsibilities. Virginia Allan, a well-known Republican businesswoman, chaired it, and Vera Glaser was among its members.

By the end of the year, the Task Force delivered a report entitled, "A Matter of Simple Justice." It contained five forward-thinking recommendations. One key recommendation was this: "The President should appoint more women to positions of top responsibility in all branches of the Federal Government, to achieve a more equitable ratio of men and women. Cabinet and agency heads should be directed to issue firm instructions that qualified women receive equal consideration in hiring and promotion." It also recommended creation of a White House office dedicated to advancing women in appointive positions.

And, it didn't happen overnight. It was more than a year before that first promise to Ms. Glaser moved into the implementation phase.

President Nixon Acts

In December 1970, the President approved an action memo that ordered the implementation of many of the Task Force's key recommendations.

In April of 1971, the President publicly announced a three-pronged initiative:

- **First**, he asked each Cabinet Secretary and agency head to submit an action plan for hiring, promoting, and advancing women in each department. He told them he wanted the plan by the middle of the following month.
- **Second**, I was hired away from Citibank in New York City to join the White House staff and recruit women for high-level jobs in government. I was also directed to build a talent bank of women and monitor progress by the departments and agencies on their action plans.
- **Third**, Jayne Baker Spain, who had been the CEO of a company in Ohio, was appointed Vice Chairman of the Civil Service Commission with responsibility for watching over the advancement of women in the career civil service.

And, President Nixon asked two Counselors to the President – Bob Finch and Don Rumsfeld – to oversee progress. Bob Finch, had previously served in President Nixon’s Cabinet and was an early convert to our cause. Rumsfeld, later served as Secretary of Defense.

We set out to double the number of women in top jobs – GS-16 and above – during the first year. We did better. Within nine months, we had met our full first-year goal. In April 1972, a year after we began, the number of women in policy-making jobs had tripled from 36 to 105.

Even more importantly perhaps was the nature of the jobs themselves. There were many “breakthroughs” – jobs women had never held before. In other words, we were blasting through glass ceilings. Every “first” makes it easier to fill that job with a woman the second time around. Eventually gender would not even be a consideration.

Thanks to the President’s support, more than 1,000 women were hired or promoted into the middle management ranks of the career civil service, at a time when the Federal Government was reducing employment by 5%. For the first time, women were serving as generals, admirals, forest rangers, FBI agents, and even tugboat captains.

By March 1973, just two years after the effort began, the number of women in top jobs had quadrupled, and Anne Armstrong had become Counselor to the President with Cabinet rank.

President Nixon’s efforts to lift up women in the Federal Government spilled over into the rest of American society as he challenged the private sector, as well as, state and local governments “to follow our lead and guarantee women equal opportunity for employment and advancement...” Business leaders, state officials and sometimes

governors themselves – came to my office to find out more about how we had achieved success.

The Nixon Administration effort is a powerful example of Presidential leadership that shows what can be accomplished with genuine commitment. It also shows how the stories that grab the headlines are not the only places where lasting change may be taking place.

Looking back now, we know that President Nixon's actions brought gender equality into the mainstream of American life. He made equality "legitimate." This legitimacy rippled through our society and helped create new opportunities for women in business, education, the professions, the arts and athletics.

But President Nixon threw himself unmistakably behind the cause of change, telling the nation in his 1972 State of the Union address, "While every woman may not want a career outside the home, every woman should have the freedom to choose whatever career she wishes, and an equal chance to pursue it." That was a bold statement by a man of that time and that generation.