

# Remembering the Untold Story of Women Who Broke the Glass Ceiling

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When I tell my story about recruiting women for high-level government jobs back in the 1970s, I often hear – from younger women – that they had no idea the hurdles we had to overcome to strive for equality for women in the workplace.

I grew up in a world these young women will never know. Title IX didn't yet exist to guarantee them nondiscrimination in academics and athletics. There wasn't a consensus in society that women should have careers, outside of being a secretary, nurse, or teacher. Yet in the 1970s, there was a great change in this kind of thinking that allowed women to break into jobs never before held by women, especially in the federal government. That change is, in a large part, thanks to President Richard Nixon and many men and women in his White House and his Administration.

When I entered the newly co-ed Harvard Business School in 1962, I did so as one of 14 women in a class of 680 men. After graduation, I landed a job at the Singer Company, and then later at what is now Citibank. I was working in quite a good position there when, in 1971, an HBS classmate of mine, Fred Malek, called me. He said that President Nixon was starting an effort to advance women in the federal government, that he needed someone to come to the White House and be the point person for that effort, and he asked if I would be interested. After much thought and many conversations with the people around me, I became convinced that this was a serious effort, and decided to accept the challenge.

The Nixon Administration's effort to recruit women followed from a 1969 press conference, in which a journalist, Vera Glaser, of the North American Newspaper Alliance, rose and asked, "Mr. President, in staffing your administration, you have so far made about 200 high-level Cabinet and other policy position appointments, and of these only three have gone to women. Can you tell us, sir, whether we can expect a more equitable recognition of women's abilities, or are we going to remain a lost sex?"

This question not only demonstrated the inequality of the time, but it served as a catalyst for a series of events that helped break the glass ceiling for women in government jobs for generations to come.

As a first step, the Administration appointed a Presidential Task Force on Women's Rights and Responsibilities, chaired by Virginia Allan, a Republican businesswoman. Vera Glaser was one of its members. This Task Force issued a report that made quite forward-thinking recommendations about the advancement of women, one of which promoted the advancement of women in government. Another recommendation was aimed at ending discrimination

in education, an idea that would later more fully become Title IX. Still another advocated the type of White House role I later took on. The Report was entitled, "A Matter of Simple Justice."

In April 1971, the President publicly announced a three-pronged initiative geared toward bringing more women into high-level government jobs.

First, he directed each of his Cabinet Secretaries and Agency heads to give him action plans for hiring, promoting, and advancing women in their departments and agencies. He wanted those plans back in a month and wanted to know who the point person would be in each department and agency for carrying it out so they could be held accountable.

The second part of this plan was my recruitment. I was brought onto the White House staff to recruit women for policymaking jobs, build a talent bank of women, and monitor the progress of the departments and agencies on their action plans.

Third, Jayne Baker Spain, a CEO and businesswoman from Ohio, was appointed to be the Vice Chairman of – what was then – the Civil Service Commission, now Office of Personnel Management, to monitor the progress of women in career government service.

We started building the talent bank of women, and it was during this time that names surfaced such as Sandra Day O'Connor who was in the Arizona state senate then, and Juanita Kreps, who was a director of companies at the time, and who later became Secretary of Commerce in the Carter Administration. The list we compiled was really quite amazing, but in general, the women I found were undertitled and underpaid in their current positions, and that was just the way it was.

President Nixon followed the progress of these efforts personally. When a Cabinet Secretary did a good job and met his targets, the President wrote a note of commendation. When a Secretary missed a target, he received a different kind of note, admonishing him. Everyone knew the President was monitoring the progress, and that understandably got people's attention.

By April 1972, one year after the action plan was implemented, our efforts led to the tripling of the number of women in high-level policy-making positions, from 36 women to 105 women. Within two years, that number was nearly quadrupled. More than half of these policy-making positions to which women were appointed during this time were previously held only by men. Among the women appointed were Cynthia Holcomb Hall, judge on the United States Tax Court; Marina von Neumann Whitman, the first woman on the President's Council of Economic Advisers; Romana Banuelos, the first Hispanic to be U.S. treasurer; Betty Southard Murphy, general counsel of the National Labor Relations Board; and Dixy Lee Ray, the first and only woman to chair the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission.

There were more breakthroughs. Anne Armstrong had become Counselor to the President with Cabinet rank. Two women were chairing regulatory agencies at the same time, which had never happened before: Helen Delich Bentley was at the Federal Maritime Commission, and Catherine May Bedell was at the U.S. Tariff Commission. The President nominated the first five women to the rank of general in the Armed Forces, a direct result of this effort, and the first admiral, too.

At the mid-level, more than 1,000 women were advanced into many positions that women had never held before and were in male-dominated fields, such as sky marshals, tug boat captains, air traffic controllers, narcotics agents, FBI and Secret Service agents, and forest rangers. The number of women appointed to boards and commissions increased as well, from over 250 in the first year, to 339 women by the end of May 1973. By that time I had a talent bank of over 1,000 names as well, that we would use for future position vacancies throughout the Administration.

Led by the President and his Administration, advances in the federal government spilled into the daily life of American society. President Nixon challenged the private sector, state, and local governments "to follow our lead and guarantee women equal opportunity for employment and advancement..." As a result, new opportunities opened up for women in academia, business, the arts, sports, and other professions.

It was also during this time, in 1972, that the President signed Title IX into law, which prohibits any person, regardless of sex, from being excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving federal financial assistance. Title IX has done more to guarantee equality for women in education than anyone at that time would have dreamed, especially in the field of athletics.

The Nixon Administration's effort is a powerful example of Presidential leadership that shows what can be accomplished with genuine commitment. The efforts of Nixon, his Administration, and most importantly, the women who were there in the 1970s broke down barriers that have stayed down. The impact of this time shaped the opportunities available to women even today, and took major steps towards equality in the workplace for women.

It is important for all women who are seeking careers in government to know about the women and men who made it possible for them to accomplish this. We must know where we have been as a society to appreciate more fully where we are now, and to know how to progress further toward opportunity and equality – and why we must. We owe it to the future generations of women, who one day may be hearing your own story.