



# A time for unity



**Sarah Baker**  
former Special Assistant  
and Associate Counsel to  
President Barack Obama

Washington, D.C. based alumna Sarah Baker is on a break. For now, at least. Having worked from the Obama White House for the last five-plus years, she's earned a little time to reflect and assess her options.

And, given her only downtime since passing the bar exam came when she surrendered her Blackberry during the government shutdown, who can blame her?

We spoke to Sarah a matter of days after President Donald Trump took office, his arrival drawing a line under her tenure at the Office of the White House Counsel. As Special Assistant and Associate Counsel to the President, her responsibilities lay in overseeing the vetting of potential federal government nominees and appointees.

Obama's modus operandi on that front built on the tried-and-tested methods of previous administrations. But, with the change in regime, came a change in approach.

### Polar opposites

"There's a marked difference between the Trump administration's vetting and that of his predecessors. It's always been a thorough process and there's a reason for that. These are important jobs and you don't put someone in a position of public trust who doesn't deserve it.

"We'd conduct extensive reviews of the public record and work hand-in-hand with partners like the Office of Government Ethics, the FBI,

and the Senate. Everyone had a role to play in ensuring we nominate not only candidates qualified for the job, but those we felt confident would serve the American public well.

"It's a real concern when that's not the driving factor. I think that remains to be seen with Trump. He's clearly driven by his gut. But, to my mind, the question that should guide the person sitting in the Oval Office for all decisions – not just about who is being nominated to key positions – and what guided President Obama, is: what is in the best interests of all Americans?"

### Double standard

"After talking about "extreme vetting" of certain immigrants for several months, Trump is now turning his words into action. Those seeking sanctuary in America already go through rigorous screening, so his move is unnecessary, unjust, and dangerous. It's also a little bewildering given his own administration's lax approach to vetting individuals he's nominated to serve in the highest levels of government. These are people who are going to oversee America's financial and national security, and our schools, for example.

"Although the Trump administration would have us believe otherwise, the indifferent stance taken to vetting its nominees is the primary reason so many of them have been held up by the Senate.

"For example, there are public reports that financial disclosure forms have been delayed,

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incomplete, and have required additional review, causing the Senate to have to delay key votes. This is serving as an unwelcome and avoidable distraction to the White House, and may still preclude confirmation.

“Admission to our country requires close scrutiny, but so should the responsibility of leading it. Running a government is serious business. So, while Trump forcefully argues for “extreme” vetting of refugees – including a five-year-old – who are already thoroughly vetted, he’d be wise to apply the same standard to those he nominates for public service.”

## Forging a consensus

In a democracy, every opinion is equal and every voice matters. A worthy sentiment, most would agree. As a goal, though, Sarah’s not sure we’re quite there yet. But she sees cause for hope.

“It’s dangerous when people paint Trump voters with a broad brush. That only breeds division. A lot of his support came from those who voted for President Barack Obama. Families who are just trying to make their lives better and don’t care whether someone is liberal or conservative, Democrat or Republican. And some of them are struggling. They might have lost their jobs and they’re unable to find suitable, alternative opportunities in our new economy.

“So, I want to understand why they voted as they did. And that starts with a conversation. There are extremes on both sides of the debate, and some truly hateful rhetoric out there, but the majority of us are reasonable individuals. Sure, we can disagree with each other but we need to talk, and listen, to each other.

“If we do that, I believe this is a tremendous opportunity to establish some middle ground. Should Trump continue to alienate whole sections of the community, that’s not beyond the realm of possibility.”

## People first

Sarah’s involvement in the world of politics goes way back. It all began when she worked for Bill Bradley, the Senator for New Jersey, as he tussled, albeit unsuccessfully, with Al Gore for the 2000 Democratic presidential nomination.

“Senator Bradley was an inspiration. He talked about things that touched me. He put people at the heart of everything. He talked about social issues that resonated with me: gun reform, poverty, and universal healthcare, issues other candidates weren’t talking about, and problems we are still talking about, and struggling with, today.”

Four years later, and, straight out of law school, Sarah was back at the political coalface.

“I was lucky enough to be involved in John Kerry’s 2004 presidential campaign, running the voter protection program in the state of Maine. Students were most at risk of disenfranchisement in Maine, thinking they’d be told they couldn’t register or fearing they’d face intimidation at the poll. So, we recruited and trained lawyers to encourage people to register, and educated students about their rights.

“It is important that we’re all able to exercise our democratic rights and it means a lot to think I may have made a difference, however small, in that regard.”

## Capital calling

As history records, John Kerry lost out narrowly, leaving President George W. Bush to a second term. But, Sarah had an offer on the table, and she moved to what was then Hogan & Hartson in Washington, D.C.

“The experience I carried forward from Hogan Lovells was invaluable. I learned to write at the firm, thanks to a few partners who helped teach me how to write with clarity, direction, and persuasion. As an associate, I was a member of the Government Investigations

and White Collar Group. That allowed me to develop the investigative skills I needed to get my first job at the White House in 2011, as a member of the team I ended up running at the end of my time there.

“In 2013, I joined the office of Dr. Jill Biden, the Second Lady of the United States, as her Policy Director. She was the first Second Lady in history also to hold a full-time job, as a community college professor. Community colleges play such an important role in education in the U.S. and she still teaches at one in Virginia. Dr. Biden’s main policy priorities were education and issues related to the military, military families, and veterans. These issues were personal to her and that made her work all the more impactful.”

## With power comes responsibility

“In October 2014, I moved back to the Office of the White House Counsel and into the position I just vacated. I inherited a team of 12 very smart lawyers, who I trusted to make decisions day-to-day. Some calls were tougher than others and were escalated to my two deputies, both of whom also had fantastic judgment, and then to me. The decisions I couldn’t make, I took to the White House Counsel, Neil Eggleston. And, when he couldn’t resolve an issue, it went to the chief of staff, or to the president, in turn. So, as my experience taught me, by the time a decision gets to the president, it has gone through a lot of very smart people, with good judgment and experience. The president gets no easy decisions.

“These are serious issues. Facts and due diligence matter. So, again, you want the person making those impossible decisions to not only be thoughtful, deliberative, and smart, but be someone who is, at heart, guided by what is best for the American public.

“The U.S. is a mish-mash of people. That’s a big part of what makes it great. And, although we don’t all agree, at the end of the day, whether we rise or fall, we are all in this together.”