

# A Team of Expatriates

**Many of Obama's top advisers, like an increasing number of Americans, have learned and lived abroad.**

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NEWSWEEK

From the magazine issue dated Jan 26, 2009

II. The fact that Valerie Jarrett spent her early childhood in Iran made it easier to bond with Barack Obama. The subject came up the first time the two met, at a restaurant in the Loop area of downtown Chicago in 1991. Obama had grown up overseas—spending four years in Indonesia as a boy—and Jarrett was born in the ancient city of Shiraz, where her American father, a medical doctor, helped found the city's first modern hospital. Valerie's early languages were Farsi, French and "a little bit of English." To this day, her favorite foods include lamb and rice with Persian spices. "If I walk into a house and I smell saffron, I'm happy," she says.

In that first encounter, Jarrett recalls discussing with Obama how their years overseas helped shape their world views. "I guess the most basic way is by being around people who have such a broad diversity of backgrounds," she says.

For Jarrett's family, who traveled extensively even after they returned to the United States when Valerie was six, that meant socializing with people from Europe, the Middle East, Africa and Latin America. "You appreciate and are maybe more open to different perspectives," she says.

It's a common point among Obama's top aides, a surprising number of whom grew up in other countries—the insight they developed by seeing America from the outside in. The former expats include retired Marine Gen. James L. Jones, the incoming national-security adviser, who lived in France for most of his childhood; Timothy Geithner, the nominee for Treasury secretary, who grew up in Zimbabwe, India and Thailand; retired Maj. Gen. J. Scott Gration, a child of missionaries in Africa who is a leading contender to become the new NASA administrator; and Jarrett, a close personal friend of the Obamas' who will serve as a top domestic-policy adviser.

Obama has identified his years in Indonesia, and later travels in Pakistan, as critical to shaping his views on America's role in the world. "If you don't understand these cultures, then it's very hard for you to make good foreign-policy decisions," he told an Iowa campaign crowd in 2007. "The benefit of my life of having both lived overseas and traveled overseas ... is I have a better sense of how they're thinking and what their society is really like."

Most of the world doesn't associate that kind of understanding with Americans, and with some reason. Even now, only about 22 percent of Americans have passports, while in many Western European countries the number is much higher—reaching 71 percent in the United Kingdom. But as the world shrinks, the numbers of Americans working and studying outside of the country is rising. In 2006–07, more than 241,000 Americans studied abroad, up from less than 100,000 who did so a decade earlier. The State Department estimates that more than 5 million Americans live overseas. For the generation of Americans coming of age now, some of the most significant opportunities—for work, investment, recreation and learning—will be global.

Gration left America in 1952, when he boarded a ship called the African Lightning and steamed out of New York harbor at the age of about 18 months. His parents were missionaries with the Africa Inland Mission. They were heading to the Kenyan port of Mombasa, and then inland by car to the Congo. Three times the family had to flee the Congo—after independence and a military coup in 1960, after the execution of Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba in 1961 and lastly during civil war in 1964. The family lost everything then, and settled in Kenya before returning to the United States in 1967. "You spend some time [in a country] and all of a sudden you can't stay in your house because the rebels are coming," says Gration. "Life itself is a gift and now you realize that freedom and life, those things we [Americans] take for granted, those values you can't put your arms around, are so precious and worth dying for."

Graton first met Obama when he was serving as director of Strategy, Plans and Policy for the European Command. In that capacity, he briefed then Senator Obama on foreign affairs, and later joined him on a trip to Africa in 2006. Last year, Graton left the Republican Party to vote for Obama in the New Jersey primary. He was attracted by Obama's interest in issues "that are borderless": the environment, trade, energy, human rights. "When you grow up as I did, surrounded by Africans, you see them as individuals—the kids I grew up with, the kids I played soccer with, [the people with whom] I went and ate around the fires," says Graton. "These were my African buddies, and so for me, when I see the strife in Darfur and when I see what's happening in eastern Congo, it's not just a problem. It's people."

Expats also learn, in a personal way, the resentments that foreigners sometimes feel toward the United States. Growing up in France after World War II, the future General Jones went to local schools outside of Paris, then to a NATO school. "In postwar France there was a lot of anti-American sentiment because of the number of bases we had and the heavy footprint we showed."

As a child and a teen, Jones would return to Missouri for two-week stints every few years, and he yearned for the kind of life where he could play baseball instead of soccer and fencing. But he also recalls watching footage of the civil-rights movement—the marches, the struggle for school integration in Little Rock, the atrocities of the Ku Klux Klan—on French television. "It was absolutely just a surreal experience for me," he says. He was very proud to be American, yet also shocked and confused by what he was watching.

Relatives in the United States sent Jones care packages—blue jeans and other American-style clothes. When he rode the French buses, the locals thought he was a tourist. "What they didn't know was that I understood everything they were saying," he says. "It wasn't always very flattering." One morning, his father woke up to find U.S. GO HOME splashed in white paint on his black Chevrolet Bel Air. At other times, tensions resulted in conflict. "I got in more fights as a kid as a result of nationality than any other reason."

But Jones grew fond of France, and he also had classmates from Germany, Spain and other NATO countries. That proved useful when he became Supreme Allied Commander in Europe years later. "You develop a fine ear for listening to nuance, and to what it is people are saying, but also how they are saying it," he says. "You have to be able to look at the same problem through different prisms to be ... successful in the international environment."

Now Jones encourages young people to go out and see other countries and cultures. Anyone who has the opportunity and doesn't seize it "is really missing out on one of the most important components of how to be successful in today's shrinking world," he says. "And if you're going to hold national office, I think it's an imperative." Obama would surely agree.

*With Richard Wolffe and Dina Fine Maron in Washington*

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