

# Nikki Haley

Presidential candidate Nikki Haley served as U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations in the Trump Administration. She was governor of South Carolina from 2011 to 2017, the first woman and Indian American to serve in that office.

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## Who Is Nikki Haley?

Nikki Haley entered politics at a young age and served in the South Carolina House of Representatives for several years before winning election for the state's governor in 2010. In addition to becoming the first female governor of

South Carolina, she was the first Indian-American to serve in the role, and the second Indian American governor in the country, after Bobby Jindal of Louisiana. In 2016, President-elect [Donald Trump](#) picked Haley to become the United States ambassador to the United Nations, a role she served from January 2017 through the end of 2018. In February 2023, the Republican announced she is running for president in the 2024 election.

## Quick Facts

**FULL NAME:** Nimrata Nikki Randhawa Haley

**BORN:** January 20, 1972

**HOMETOWN:** Bamberg, South Carolina

**SPOUSE:** Michael Haley (1996–)

**CHILDREN:** Rena and Nalin

**ASTROLOGICAL SIGN:** Aquarius

## Early Life and Career

Nimrata Nikki Randhawa Haley, better known as Nikki Haley, was born on January 20, 1972, in Bamberg, South Carolina, to Sikh immigrants from Punjab, India. She attended local schools and graduated from Clemson University with a bachelor of science in accounting. Haley went on to work for her mother's upscale clothing business, Exotica International, helping to make it a multimillion-dollar company.

In 1998, Haley was named to the Orangeburg County Chamber of Commerce's board of directors, and in 2003, to that of the Lexington Chamber of Commerce. She became president of the National Association of Women Business Owners (NAWBO) in 2004 and immersed herself in a number of organizations, including the Lexington Medical Foundation, West Metro Republican Women, and the South Carolina Chapter of NAWBO.

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## South Carolina Congresswoman

Haley ran for a seat in the South Carolina House of Representatives in 2004 and faced a challenge in the primary from incumbent Republican Larry Koon, the longest-serving member of the House at that time. She won the primary

and then the general election, in which she ran unopposed, and became the first Indian-American to hold office in South Carolina. She ran unopposed for re-election in 2006 and defeated her Democrat challenger in 2008.

As a Republican, Haley's platform was anti-tax and fiscally conservative. She voted for bills that restrict abortion and those that protect fetuses. As the child of legal immigrants, Haley expressed support for greater enforcement of immigration laws.

## **Campaign Controversy and Historic Election to Governor**

Haley, a member of the Tea Party movement, announced in May 2009 that she would run for governor in 2010. She was endorsed by former Massachusetts Gov. [Mitt Romney](#), former Alaska Gov. [Sarah Palin](#), and Jenny Sanford, the incumbent first lady of South Carolina.

Prior to Haley's election, she was accused of having affairs with two different men, Will Folks, former press secretary for then-South Carolina Gov. Mark Sanford, and Larry Marchant, a political consultant for Haley's opponent, Andre Bauer. Haley denied the allegations, saying that she had been faithful to her husband, Michael. In an interview with Columbia's WVOC radio on June 4, 2010, Haley said that if she were elected governor and the claims against her were validated, she would resign.

Around the same time those affair claims were made, South Carolina state Sen. Jake Knotts—a supporter of Haley's opponent, Bauer—called her a “raghead.” Knotts vehemently defended his comments at first, saying Haley was hiding her Sikh religion and posing as a Methodist. He later apologized and said the remark was “intended in jest.”

In a June 2010 *Newsweek* article, Haley was quoted speaking about breaking racial and gender barriers: “The fact that I happen to be an Indian female, of course that brings a new dynamic,” she said. “But what I hope it does is cause a conversation in this state where we no longer live by layers, but we live by philosophies.”

After winning the runoff vote for the Republican gubernatorial primary, Haley was elected governor of South Carolina on November 2, 2010, making her the

state's first female and first Indian-American governor. She was reelected for a second term in 2014.

## 2012 Vice President Speculation

In 2012, rumors spread that Mitt Romney, President [Barack Obama](#)'s challenger in the 2012 presidential election, would choose Haley as his vice-presidential running mate. However, Haley said that she would decline any position he might offer her. "The people of South Carolina gave me a chance," she said in an *Associated Press* interview in April 2012. "I have a job to do, and I'm not going to leave my job for anything." Romney went on to announce Wisconsin Rep. [Paul Ryan](#) as his running mate for vice president in August 2012.

## Charleston Church Shooting and Confederate Flag Removal

On June 17, 2015, the country was rocked when Dylann Roof, a 21-year-old white man, went on a racist-fueled shooting rampage at the historic Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina. Roof was welcomed into the church, where he sat with parishioners and the pastor Clementa Pinckney during Bible study before he stood up and announced that he was there "to shoot Black people," according to witnesses. Roof opened fire, killing six women and three men, including Rev. Pinckney, who was also a state senator. Roof later told police he wanted to ignite "a race war."

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A day after the tragedy, Gov. Haley said in an interview on NBC's *Today* show that the shootings should be labeled a hate crime and prosecutors should seek the death penalty in the case. She called Roof, who had posted a racist manifesto on a website and posed in photographs on his Facebook page wearing white supremacist emblems, "a person filled with hate."

Roof was also seen in photographs posing with a Confederate battle flag, which ignited a debate about whether the flag—a symbol of hate and division for some, while a source of Southern heritage and pride for others—should be flown at the State Capitol. On June 22, 2015, Haley took a stand calling for the flag's removal. "Today, we are here in a moment of unity in our state without

ill will to say it is time to remove the flag from our Capitol grounds,” she said at a news conference surrounded by a group of bipartisan politicians. “This flag, while an integral part of our past, does not represent the future of our great state.”

On July 7, the South Carolina Senate voted 36–3 to remove the flag from the Capitol grounds, and on July 9, the state’s House of Representatives voted 94–20 to pass the Senate bill. That same day, Gov. Haley signed the bill into law in a ceremony in the lobby of the statehouse, which was attended by state legislators, governors, and relatives of the shooting victims. “It is a new day in South Carolina, a day we can all be proud of, a day that truly brings us all together as we continue to heal, as one people and one state,” Haley said, adding: “Now, this is about our children.”

Haley also said that nine commemorative pens from the ceremony would be given to the shooting victims’ families.

## **2016 State of the Union Response**

The Republican Party selected Haley to deliver the GOP response following President Obama’s final State of the Union address on January 12, 2016. While Haley recognized Obama’s historic presidency as the first African-American to be elected, she criticized his record. “Barack Obama’s election as president seven years ago broke historic barriers and inspired millions of Americans,” she said. “As he did when he first ran for office, tonight President Obama spoke eloquently about grand things. He is at his best when he does that. Unfortunately, the President’s record has often fallen far short of his soaring words.”

Haley also recalled her experience as an Indian-American growing up in the rural South and called for tolerance and inclusiveness of all Americans. “Today, we live in a time of threats like few others in recent memory,” she said. “During anxious times, it can be tempting to follow the siren call of the angriest voices. We must resist that temptation. No one who is willing to work hard, abide by our laws, and love our traditions should ever feel unwelcome in this country.”

## **2016 Vice President Speculation**

Following her response, press outlets reported that Haley was on the GOP short list as a possible vice presidential running mate for the party's 2016 nominee, [Donald Trump](#), though he ended up choosing Indiana Gov. [Mike Pence](#) for the position. During the presidential race, Haley had not been a loyal supporter of Trump, initially campaigning for Sen. [Marco Rubio](#) and then endorsing Sen. [Ted Cruz](#).

Haley also criticized Trump for not immediately disavowing the Ku Klux Klan's support of him and for his proposed Muslim ban. Trump responded to Haley's criticism with his own critiques of her, including calling her "weak on immigration" and tweeting in March 2016: "The people of South Carolina are embarrassed by Nikki Haley!"

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## **U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations**

By the end of the contentious campaign, Haley did vote for Trump in the election and celebrated his victory. "The idea that now we can start to really govern—I have never known what it's like to have a Republican president," she said at a gathering of Republican leaders after the election. "I can tell you that the last five years, Washington has been the hardest part of my job. This is a new day."

On November 22, 2016, President-elect Donald Trump picked Haley to become the United States ambassador to the United Nations. She was the first woman to be named as part of his administration. "Governor Haley has a proven track record of bringing people together regardless of background or party affiliation to move critical policies forward for the betterment of her state and our country," Trump said in a statement. "She will be a great leader representing us on the world stage."

In accepting the offer, Haley said that she was "honored that the President-elect has asked me to join his team and serve the country we love." She also said: "When the President believes you have a major contribution to make to the welfare of our nation, and to our nation's standing in the world, that is a calling that is important to heed."

On January 24, 2017, Haley was confirmed as U.N. Ambassador by the Senate, 94–6, and she resigned as governor of South Carolina to serve in her new role.

She became the first Indian American in a presidential cabinet, [according to the Associated Press](#).

Over her first few months as the U.N. Ambassador, Haley found her time consumed by keeping the international community attuned to threats from Russia, North Korea, and Iran. In December 2017, she forcefully defended President Trump's recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital, referring to it as the "will of the American people" and something that would "fastball the peace process going forward."

Around the same time, Haley drew attention for her comments about the sexual harassment issues that had ensnared political colleagues back home. Specifically referring to the women who had accused President Trump of sexual misconduct, she said, "They should be heard, and they should be dealt with. ... And I think any woman who has felt violated or felt mistreated in any way, they have every right to speak up."

On April 15, 2018, Haley ignited a controversy by announcing during her rounds of the Sunday morning news circuit that the U.S. was imposing more sanctions on Russia, for its continued support of Syria following a chemical attack on Syrian citizens. The White House contradicted that claim the following day, confirming that additional sanctions were on the table but not definitively forthcoming.

The mismatched statements prompted questions about coordination of the message and whether Haley was taking the blame for uncertainty on the part of the president. On April 17, 2018, National Economic Council Director Larry Kudlow said Haley "got ahead of the curve" as part of some "momentary confusion," but Haley quickly shot back with [a statement on Fox News](#), saying, "With all due respect, I don't get confused."

On October 9, 2018, Haley submitted her resignation and said she would leave the U.S. Ambassador's office at the end of the year.

## **Post-Ambassador Career and Books**

In February 2019, Boeing nominated Haley to join its board of directors. Shareholders voted her in during an April 29, 2019, meeting. Less than a year later, Haley resigned from the board after [disagreeing with the company's request for a federal stimulus package](#) in the early days of the COVID-19



pandemic. “I cannot support a move to lean on the federal government for a stimulus or bailout that prioritizes our company over others and relies on taxpayers to guarantee our financial position,” she wrote in a letter to Boeing’s chief executive.

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In November 2019, Haley published her second memoir, *[With All Due Respect: Defending America with Grit and Grace](#)*. The book contained the headline-grabbing allegations that former Secretary of State [Rex Tillerson](#) and former Chief of Staff John Kelly attempted to sway her toward subverting President Trump’s directives in an effort to “save the country.” As to her own views of Trump, Haley pointed out the times she had disagreed with him while noting her obligation to serve the commander-in-chief elected by the people.

Haley has written two other books: *[Can’t Is Not an Option: My American Story](#)*, her 2012 memoir about her early life and path to the South Carolina Governor’s office, and *[If You Want Something Done](#)* (2022), which is about 10 female leaders.

## 2024 Presidential Campaign

On February 14, 2023, Haley announced her 2024 presidential campaign [in a video](#). If successful, she will become the first female president and first Indian American president.

## Personal Life and Family

Haley was raised Sikh, but [in a 2020 podcast interview](#), Haley said her parents exposed her to other religions while growing up. Later, she converted to Christianity and attends the Mt. Horeb United Methodist Church. Out of respect for her parents’ culture, she still attends Sikh services.

In 1996, Haley married Michael Haley, whom she met at Clemson University. They had two wedding ceremonies, one Sikh and one Methodist. Michael serves as an officer in the South Carolina Army National Guard and was the first-ever First Gentleman of South Carolina when Haley was governor. The couple have a daughter, Rena, and a son, Nalin.



## Quotes

- *The fact that I happen to be an Indian female, of course that brings a new dynamic. But what I hope it does is cause a conversation in this state where we no longer live by layers, but we live by philosophies.*
  - *The people of South Carolina gave me a chance. I have a job to do, and I'm not going to leave my job for anything.*
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