



Congresswoman Barbara Lee (D-CA) began her political career as an intern in the office of her predecessor, Ron Dellums. Upon his retirement, she won the seat in a special election in 1998. Her willingness to stand on principle earned her international acclaim when she was the only member of Congress to vote against giving then-President Bush a blank check to wage war after the 9-11 attacks. She continues to be one of Congress's most vocal opponents to the war in Iraq. Chair of the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC), she also serves on the powerful House Appropriations Committee, among others. In 2006, Mills College (her alma mater) established the Barbara Lee Distinguished Chair in Women's Leadership in recognition of her courageous leadership in politics, policymaking, and human rights.



§ CHAPTER TWO §

We Can Make A Difference

Barbara Lee

It was about 8:30 in the morning, and I was in a meeting at the Capitol—very few members of Congress are around that early—when we received word that a plane was headed towards the capitol and we had to evacuate. People were screaming to get out, get out, now, to run. Run where? I thought. Then I was just running and I saw the smoke coming from the Pentagon. It was terrifying. As it turned out, my chief of staff's cousin was one of the flight attendants on flight number 93. She and the pilot who diverted the plane were African American and from my constituency in Oakland, California. So, for the next days, as the resolution to go to war was being prepared, I was as angry, upset, depressed, and scared as anybody.

It was horrible, but knowing what was right and what was wrong, saying my prayers and asking God to give me the strength to weather the storm, at the end of the day I couldn't vote for something that I knew was unconstitutional, and that would give [the Bush] or any administration a blank check to wage war. I read the Bible, the passage that says, in essence, when the winds are blowing and evil is all around you, just stand and know God will take care of everything.

I had to read the resolution, then reread the appropriate provisions in the Constitution, so it was a grueling twenty-four-hour process. Then I went to the Master Cathedral for the memorial service, and—I will never forget this—when Reverend Nathan Baxter prayed, “Let us not become the evil we deplore,” a peace came over me.

There has not been one second when I thought that maybe my vote was not the right vote. I think there is still fear in the collective psyche of the American people of another 9-11. [The Bush] administration connected a lot of things together that were not really connected, and that increased that fear. If you look back at history, you’ll see that a government can get away with doing anything it wants if the people are fearful enough.

I grew up in a military family. My dad served in Korea and Vietnam, so I know what being a patriot is and the toll it takes on families, what veterans need, and that you only go to war when there is an imminent attack or an immediate need.

My two sisters and I were sent to a Catholic school, St. Joseph, in El Paso, Texas, and the nuns there were very involved in social justice. Our parents refused to let us go to a segregated school although the all-black school was very good. We ended up being the only black students in the school. It was like living in two worlds, as our neighborhood was only black and Latino kids, but it definitely gave me an insight into white America.

My family was very strict. I couldn’t talk to boys, couldn’t date until age sixteen. All I could do was practice piano, study, read, and go to church. I wanted to become Catholic and after much begging and pleading was finally allowed to be baptized into the Catholic Church. Over the years I’ve grown to understand the power of prayer and of God’s intervention in our lives, and that has given me a lot of strength. However, when it comes to politics, I am very clear in my belief in the separation of church and state.

Between my first and second years of graduate school at UC Berkeley, I was a capitol intern. I was really struggling to make

ends meet. I sent my kids to live with their grandmother in Texas and went to Washington, DC, to work for Ron Dellums. That was the year of Watergate—it was quite a summer. He invited me to come back and manage his office. I had planned to open my mental health center [for the underserved black population in southwest Berkeley] and had already raised all this money. But after talking about it with a number of friends, I realized the opportunity in front of me, and we hired someone else to run the center.

When I went back to work for Ron, I used to watch Shirley Chisholm. She was the first black woman in Congress. She had come to Mills College, spoken about all kinds of issues, and I listened to everything she had to say. She was just amazing. And then she announced that she was running for president! I went up to speak to her, and the first thing she said was, “My dear, if you really want to shake things up and really believe in what you say, then the first thing you had to do is register to vote!” [Barbara Lee had never registered because she felt that reform had to happen from outside the political system.] I found out that she didn’t have an organized campaign in northern California, so I got together with Sandy Gaines, who was the Student Union president, and together we ended up organizing Shirley Chisholm’s regional campaign out of my government class at Mills, and I got an A in a class I thought I was going to flunk.

We stayed friends forever—I really loved her, and she would encourage me and show me how to do things. She was the first African American on the Rules Committee and was very powerful. She really navigated that whole house. She said, “You’ve got to shake things up. These rules are not made for us. You have got to change the rules. Don’t go along to get along.”

I think that women can bring more sanity, sensitivity, intellect, and heart to things because we come with the history of oppression, sexism, and, for women of color, racism. We have a standard for what’s good and bad, and you need that in lawmaking.

In general, men don't have the experience we have. They don't see that cutting childcare is going to hurt a woman who is trying to get through school and that if you cut childcare she could end up on the streets. They may know it intellectually, but when it comes to doing something instinctively, they won't. They will say, "So what if this woman is forced out, that's life. Let her fend for herself. She should be able to take care of her own kids."

Not all men think this way, but most of the ones that run the House and Congress do. As chair of the CBC Task Force on Global HIV/AIDS, I have visited areas where commercial sex workers are doing the only thing they can to take care of their kids. These women are desperate for training and jobs. Men will cut money to the very organizations that provide health care to commercial sex workers and try to help the women leave the profession, on the premise that if they support these organizations, they are supporting prostitution. They won't allow the organizations to distribute condoms because "we have an abstinence-only policy."

A lot of sexism and racism is subconscious. When men in power have a choice to make about who benefits, the choice becomes about who's valuable and who's not. It's key that women become more politically involved, both in and out of office—and especially women who don't act like men. But the system sucks you up when you get in, so you have to consciously, ever day, remember that the people elected you because you are a woman and have a different point of view. They did not elect me because I am a white guy who will maintain the status quo.

As women, we tend to fear that we won't fit in and be part of the group, and we have to fight that. We have seventy women in Congress now, and the Women's Caucus includes Republican and Democratic women. There's a supportive environment. Women and children's issues are something we all agree on.

My mother says that this career is the best thing that could have happened to me. Otherwise I would be off on some island writing poetry by myself. Falling into politics was totally counterintuitive

for my personality. Music, design, architecture—I must have two thousand books on design, and every time I have ten minutes I'm drawing something—I love all of it. These things give me a bit of respite and peace. If you are in public life, 95 percent of what you do is public. I think it's very abnormal to always be exposed; it is counter to what the human spirit needs to survive. I wish more public officials would understand that and could chill out and regroup. I think it would make for less mean-spiritedness.

I have much more patience than I had as a younger woman and it's a good thing because my challenge intellectually is trying to stop all these wars. I was the most senior Democratic woman on the International Relations Committee when Condoleezza Rice was the most senior Republican woman—a real challenge in terms of foreign policy. But when you follow what your gut and your heart tells you, you never make a mistake, never.

I think what's important is the path we're on, but you can't be so programmed and organized that you miss out on the diversions in the road. I never planned a career in Congress. You have to be open to the possibilities and trust your inner listening. We can make a difference.