

The Honorable Barbara Boxer

U.S. Representative of California (1983–1993) and U.S. Senator of California (1993–2017)

Special Exhibit: A Century of Women in Congress

“I Was the First One Up the Stairs”

The Honorable Barbara Boxer recalls how she and other Congresswomen responded to the Senate hearings involving Anita Hill and Clarence Thomas.

Interview recorded November 29, 2018

What happened was I was—I’ll never forget—I was running for the Senate at the time, and I was in my car on my way to an event, and I heard that after they had already voted Clarence Thomas—they had shut down the hearing at least. They had shut down the hearing. This professor had come forward and told the story of being sexually harassed. And I thought, “Well, that’s the end. He’ll pull out of the, you know, he won’t, he won’t continue,” because she was so believable and so professional and so controlled and so bright. And so I thought, “Well, you know, once I get back to Washington, they’ll have decided to put somebody else up.” But that was not the case. When I got back to Washington, they were just going to continue—and this was a Democratic Senate. So the women in the House were so upset. Remember there were hardly any women in the Senate—two, I think—and so, and none were on the committee. So, Schroeder, so that day, we gathered on the House Floor, and we said, “We need to make a stand and force them to reopen the hearing to hear Anita Hill.” And Schroeder said, “I have an idea.” She said, “Some of us should walk over to the Senate and demand to see George Mitchell,” who was then the Majority Leader. “And some of us should stay in the House and make one minute remarks.” So I said, “Okay, ready to go.” And we walked over. And everyone credits me with the idea because I was the first one up the stairs, but that was just my California running upstairs training. I was fast. Nothing to do with—but, but when we got up there, I did play a major role because they said, “You can’t see George Mitchell. No. We don’t—” and they said—and I quote the woman who I later—she apologized later—she said, “You can’t see George Mitchell because we don’t allow strangers in the Senate.” And I said, “Strangers? We’re 10 women—or seven women, whatever we were—we have 100 years of experience between us, we’re not strangers.” And she said, “Well, that’s just a term of ours. Anyone who’s not a Senator we call a stranger.” But she made that up. That was not true, but she said it with such conviction. And I said, “Well, I don’t care what you call us, this is wrong.” And I said to her, “Do you see all those cameras down there? We’re going to go down there, and we’re going to say that you shut us out, and we couldn’t see George Mitchell.” And she said, “Just a minute.” And she said, “Okay, he’ll see you now.”