

The Honorable Barbara Boxer
U.S. Representative of California (1983–1993)
U.S. Senator of California (1993–2017)

Oral History Interview
Final Edited Transcript
November 29, 2018

Office of the Historian
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C.

“So without Anita having the courage of her convictions, and without those of us walking over, I never would have made it to the Senate ever because no one really knew in the country how few women there were. And I had many male supporters, who started off not supporting me, who when they saw the Senate said, ‘Oh my God, never realized there were so few women in the Senate. I’m going to back you and Dianne [Feinstein],’ because Dianne was running at the time. So it was, I would say, it was impactful is an understatement. Without that situation, I never would have made it. I just wouldn’t have.”

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Abstract

At a young age, Barbara Boxer learned the importance of voting from her mother who was born before the ratification of the 19th Amendment in 1920. Boxer explains how the Vietnam War sparked her political and community activism and led her to work on campaigns, including George McGovern’s presidential run in 1972. In her interview she describes why she decided to run for local office—Marin County Board of Supervisors—and how she made the difficult choice to try again after losing her first bid. Boxer won her second campaign and eventually served as the first chairwoman of the board. She explains how her work at the local level taught her the importance of “building consensus” and “keeping in touch with the people”—lessons that served her well in Congress. Boxer also gained valuable experience working for Representative John Burton of California. When Burton opted not to seek re-election for a sixth term, he asked his former staffer to run for his seat.

In her interview, the California Representative describes the challenges of her first House campaign and discusses the significance of John Burton’s endorsement, as well as the assistance provided by California Congressmen Vic Fazio and George Miller. Boxer comments on her efforts to encourage women to donate to her campaign and how this led to an annual fundraiser featuring the historic achievements of women. Once in Congress, Boxer became an outspoken advocate for women, children, and the environment. She explains how she became the original House sponsor for the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) and reveals the way in which the AIDS epidemic—that had such a devastating impact on San Francisco during the 1980s—propelled much of her legislative work in Congress. During her decade in the House, Boxer fought against gender discrimination in the institution. She describes the early 1980s as “a time of great change” where she and her women colleagues often faced discrimination. Boxer illustrates how women Representatives, although small in number, worked together to gain access to the House gym and to lead a protest during the Clarence Thomas Supreme Court nomination hearings that made national headlines and contributed to her successful run for the U.S. Senate in 1992. As one of the few women to serve in both the House and the Senate, Boxer compares her experiences and outlines the key differences between the two bodies.

Biography

BOXER, Barbara, a Senator and a Representative from California; born Barbara Levy in Brooklyn, Kings County, N.Y., November 11, 1940; attended public schools in Brooklyn; graduated, Wingate High School 1958; B.A., Brooklyn College 1962; stockbroker 1962-1965; newspaper editor 1972–1974; congressional aide 1974–1976; elected member, Board of Supervisors, Marin County, Calif. 1976–1982; delegate, California State Democratic convention 1983; elected as a Democrat to the Ninety-eighth and to the four succeeding Congresses (January 3, 1983–January 3, 1993); was not a candidate for reelection to the House of Representatives in 1992; elected to the United States Senate in 1992; reelected in 1998, 2004, and again in 2010, and served from January 3, 1993, to January 3, 2017; chair, Committee on Environment and Public Works (One Hundred Tenth to One Hundred Thirteenth Congresses), Select Committee on Ethics (One Hundred Tenth to One Hundred Thirteenth Congresses); was not a candidate for reelection to the Senate in 2016.

[Read full biography](#)

Editing Practices

In preparing interview transcripts for publication, the editors sought to balance several priorities:

- As a primary rule, the editors aimed for fidelity to the spoken word and the conversational style in accord with generally accepted oral history practices.
- The editors made minor editorial changes to the transcripts in instances where they believed such changes would make interviews more accessible to readers. For instance, excessive false starts and filler words were removed when they did not materially affect the meaning of the ideas expressed by the interviewee.
- In accord with standard oral history practices, interviewees were allowed to review their transcripts, although they were encouraged to avoid making substantial editorial revisions and deletions that would change the conversational style of the transcripts or the ideas expressed therein.
- The editors welcomed additional notes, comments, or written observations that the interviewees wished to insert into the record and noted any substantial changes or redactions to the transcript.
- Copy-editing of the transcripts was based on the standards set forth in *The Chicago Manual of Style*.

The first reference to a Member of Congress (House or Senate) is underlined in the oral history transcript. For more information about individuals who served in the House or Senate, please refer to the online *Biographical Directory of the United States Congress*, <http://bioguide.congress.gov> and the “People Search” section of the History, Art & Archives website, <http://history.house.gov>.

For more information about the U.S. House of Representatives oral history program contact the Office of House Historian at (202) 226-1300, or via email at history@mail.house.gov.

Citation Information

When citing this oral history interview, please use the format below:

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Interviewer Biographies

Matt Wasniewski is the Historian of the U.S. House of Representatives, a position he has held since 2010. He has worked in the House as a historical editor and manager since 2002. Matt served as the editor-in-chief of *Women in Congress, 1917–2006* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2006), *Black Americans in Congress, 1870–2007* (GPO, 2008), *Hispanic Americans in Congress, 1822–2012* (GPO, 2013), and *Asian and Pacific Islander Americans in Congress: 1900–2017* (GPO, 2017). He helped to create the House’s first oral history program, focusing on collecting the institutional memory of current and former Members, longtime staff, and support personnel. Matt earned his Ph.D. in U.S. history from the University of Maryland, College Park. His prior work experience includes several years as the associate historian and communications director at the U.S. Capitol Historical Society, and, in the early 1990s, as the sports editor for a northern Virginia newspaper.

Kathleen Johnson is the Manager of Oral History for the Office of the Historian, U.S. House of Representatives. She earned a B.A. in history from Columbia University, where she also played basketball for four years, and holds two master’s degrees from North Carolina State University in education and public history. In 2004, she helped to create the House’s first oral history program, focusing on collecting the institutional memory of Members and staff. She co-authored two books: *Women in Congress: 1917–2006* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 2006) and *Black Americans in Congress: 1870–2007* (GPO, 2008). Before joining the Office of the Historian, she worked as a high school history teacher and social studies curriculum consultant.

— THE HONORABLE BARBARA BOXER OF CALIFORNIA —
A CENTURY OF WOMEN IN CONGRESS

JOHNSON: The date is November 29th, 2018. My name is Kathleen Johnson. I'm here with Matt Wasniewski, who is the House Historian, and we are very excited to be speaking with Senator [Barbara] Boxer of California. Thank you again for speaking with us today.¹

BOXER: Sure.

JOHNSON: So to begin with, what we were wondering is when you were growing up, what the expectations were about your role in society as a woman?

BOXER: Slim to none, to be honest. My mother was born in 1911. She didn't even have the right to vote when she was born. When she got it in 1920, she cherished it. And the one thing that she drummed into my head was how precious that vote was, and she always took me with her to vote. And she said, "Honey, this is what America's about, and your vote is secret, and everyone gets—and I don't even tell daddy how I vote." I remember she said that to me. "I don't even tell daddy how I vote." So I did learn this critical importance of voting. I did know that America essentially took my ancestors in. My mother came when she was nine months old to escape anti-Semitism in Europe, so I was very aware of that. Around the kitchen table, there was a lot of talk about the concentration camps and how great America was to beat the Nazis. I was very aware of all the issues, civil rights, very much aware. Jackie Robinson played for the [Brooklyn] Dodgers, and I lived six blocks from Ebbets Field, and my dad told me how incredibly brave he was. So I would say that I was extremely aware and sensitized to many, many issues.

But in terms of my role being part of the system? Zero. And I remember my mother said when I was a little girl, “There’s one woman in the Senate. Her name is Margaret Chase Smith. And imagine, she must be something, because there are no women in that.” So I could say that I was aware of the issues, but I had no thought about being in politics, nor was it presented as any opportunity or possibility.

JOHNSON: So how did you first become interested in politics? What was that spark for you?

BOXER: The spark was—as I say, I always voted, and I cared, but for myself getting into politics was the Vietnam War. I had two little kids, they were very young, and I thought this war is never going to end. And it’s a civil war, and it’s wrong, and what can I do, I said to myself, to end it. And that led me to politics, and I began to work for candidates who were for ending the war, like George E. [Edward] Brown [Jr.], who had been a House Member, and he ran for the U.S. Senate, and I managed his campaign in my county, which he won—the only county he won—{laughter} and I worked for George [Stanley] McGovern, and he lost every state, I think, almost. Maybe one he picked up. So it was a tough beginning.

Then I ran myself in ’72, and I lost the first race [for Marin board of supervisors]. And the only reason—it was for local government—and the only reason I tried again was I had read an article in *Ms.* magazine. And *Ms.* magazine was founded by Gloria Steinem and others in those years, and they said, “You know what, women take losses too personally. You have to try again. Don’t give up.” And they talked about [Abraham] Lincoln had lost many elections and so on, [Richard Milhous] Nixon, and we shouldn’t take it

personally. So I tried again, and I won the second time, local office. Then I won again and, well, I won every election since then—11 straight. So that was it. But it really was war and peace that got me into it.

WASNIEWSKI: Was there anyone who served as a political inspiration or mentor for you?

BOXER: Well, in the early years it had to be John [Fitzgerald] Kennedy. There really were no women mentors at all. When I got to the [Marin] board of supervisors, I was the second woman ever elected there, and then we had many more to follow in local government. So truly my—I wouldn't say mentors—my inspiration people, like John Kennedy, Robert [Francis] Kennedy, people like that that I really admired, there were some people in local government, all men, who were environmentalists. I really loved what they were doing. But as far as women, it wasn't until I got to the Senate when Barbara [Ann] Mikulski really led the way for how to be a good Senator. She really helped us. But all those other years I have to say I was {laughter} doing my thing and hoping it was the right thing.

WASNIEWSKI: How did you come to work for John [Lowell] Burton in the mid-1970s?

BOXER: Well, John, it came out of the Vietnam War, my interest in that. And so he ran for Congress, and he was a very strong progressive. So I worked for him, and I don't know if you read my book, the whole biography's in there, but what I did was, after I lost my race for supervisor, I then became a journalist and worked for a local paper.² I enjoyed it very much. And so I kept on all the issues, and that's how I met John, through that. He needed some communications person, so that's how I got there.

Sadly, John was addicted to drugs and alcohol, and he quit, and he called me and said, “Would you run for my seat?” And I was midterm into my second term on the board of supervisors, and we discussed it, my family and I—could we really go to the House? My kids were 15 and 17. That was a consideration. They were a little young, but we all agreed, the whole family, that this opportunity wouldn’t come again. So I did run and win in ’82, as you know, that’s when I got there.

WASNIEWSKI: Right.

BOXER: But it was because John was so sick, and he couldn’t do it anymore. So he endorsed me. What was really interesting is that Senator [Dianne] Feinstein was then a mayor or—I think she was mayor of San Francisco, and she endorsed somebody else. So she endorsed a really lovely woman named Louise Renne. So it was kind of a Burton/Feinstein battle. {laughter} It was so crazy. And I won that seat. And then who knew Dianne and I would have our paths cross, and we would make history together all those years later?

WASNIEWSKI: Right. So you were on the Marin board of supervisors for six years. Was there anything in that experience that prepared you for your career in the House?

BOXER: Oh, everything about it prepared me because, look, when you serve on any board or commission or any level of government, it’s all about building consensus, it’s all about picking your priorities, doing your homework, keeping in touch with the people, and if you don’t do that, you get nothing done. And so that was the role model that I used. And it was a very all politics is local type of a role model. My board of supervisor experience was really based on protecting the beauty of the county, making sure that we

didn't wreck it, and have growth take place in a certain corridor and preserve the western part of the county. So all of that was controversial, and all of that was about building consensus, and that's what I focused on there. Also, helping people who needed help, whether it was drug addiction, which was big, and there weren't enough county programs to help, we embraced some of them. So there was a lot of stuff going on. And so I would say every office I held prepared me for the next office I held.

JOHNSON: You mentioned that John Burton asked you to run for his seat, and he came out and endorsed you publicly. How important was that endorsement to your campaign?

BOXER: Oh, hugely important because John was beloved. John is still beloved. And he went on—after he got cured from his addiction problems, he went back to the state legislature, and he was so popular he became the [California] state senate pro tem, and he was the head of the [state] senate. So his endorsement was very important. And he really helped me, even though, as I say, he wasn't well. But just having that endorsement was very helpful because people trusted him.

JOHNSON: What were some key moments in that first campaign for Congress for you? Maybe a time when you realized that you had a good shot of winning this and coming to the House?

BOXER: Well, it was such an interesting race in many ways because it was the midterm of Ronald Reagan, and Ronald Reagan was very popular. I was against Ronald Reagan because I believed he didn't care about the environment. He said, "If you've seen one tree, you've seen them all." And I

thought he wasn't very kind to people who didn't make it. And so I ran against Ronald Reagan, basically. As a matter of fact, my slogan—I can't even believe it, that I had the audacity to use this slogan—it was “Barbara Boxer Gives a Damn.” And looking back on it I think, “Oh my God, people would just kill me if I did it today.” And that was my slogan. Reagan was not popular in the midterm because there was a horrible recession, just terrible. And so even though I had a hard primary, I felt I could win the general election.

But it was a hard race. Both were hard because the district included a naval shipyard, and I was in a very blue collar area. And John was very blue collar. The district was very—let's say it was reapportioned in a strange way, {laughter} but it had parts of San Francisco, all of Marin County, and this area called Vallejo, which had a naval shipyard called Mare Island Naval Shipyard, and the last thing those people wanted to do, the blue collar workers, was elect a woman from suburbia, you know? And someone who made her career based on peace. {laughter} It was a hard race, but I did it.

It's funny, you ask about endorsements, I had a lot of male Congressmen who really helped me, like Vic [Victor Herbert] Fazio [Jr.] was one of them, John Burton was one of them, George Miller. And they all came to Vallejo, and they said, “Hey, she's good people. She could do it. Her husband's a labor lawyer, so vote for her.” {laughter} I was fortunate that my husband was a labor lawyer, but it was a very hard race. But I knew I could win it, but I knew also it was going to be hard.

But I got there. And when I got there, there were I think—and you would know this—I think we had 28 women out of 435 in 1983. You should check

that. That's what I remember. And I couldn't believe the prejudice against women was pretty strong, even for me, even though I'd experienced quite a lot of it, it was really bad there. Because most of the women there had gotten there because their husbands died, and they were basically filling out the term. But there were a few of us who were very perky. We wanted to make our own way. Barbara Mikulski, well, Barbara was there. Who else? Barbara [Bailey] Kennelly was there. Gerry [Geraldine Anne] Ferraro was there. There were a few of us.

JOHNSON: And Pat [Patricia Scott] Schroeder.

WASNIEWSKI: Pat Schroeder.

BOXER: Pat for sure. We were very good friends. And I remember in those years the women {laughter} all wore either black, brown, or gray suits. And I remember Pat and I, because we were from the West, we weren't used to that very conservative way women would dress in the workplace. So we would wear bright colors, like orange and yellow, and people would say, "That is crazy." So I remember that, {laughter} so that became a big thing. "Oh my goodness. What are you doing? What are you people doing to the institution?"

WASNIEWSKI: We have some questions about your first term, but I just—before we got too far away from your first campaign, we were just interested—and you mentioned your husband and the fact that it was pointed out he was a labor lawyer, but was your family involved in that initial campaign?

BOXER: Oh, sure they were. They were great. They were helping me campaign. They didn't interfere, and they didn't have any official role, but they would come

with me to different events and be very supportive, yes, because it was really a family decision for me to do that.

JOHNSON: You mentioned that one of your opponents was Louise Renne. And so it was unusual for that time to have two women candidates. So we were curious if you received any—or what fundraising was like for you, if you received any support from any women’s groups, national or local?

BOXER: That’s a great, great question. Women never gave money in those days to politicians. They did not—ever. I mean, maybe one out of a million women gave, but in the general election, one of my friends said, “We’re going to make history here. Let’s do a women’s luncheon.” And I said, “Nobody’s going to come.” And they said, “Well, let’s price it low.” And I said, “Okay.” And then my friend Duane Garrett, who is no longer with us—that’s sad to say—said, “Wait a minute. Let’s price it at \$100.” And we all went, “Oh my God, no one’s going to give \$100.” Well, to our surprise women flocked to the event, and it became—it was, up until that time in history, the largest women’s event, most successful, in the country, period. And it was so exciting, that moment, and we called it “Women Making History.” We honored women who were doing unusual things, like they were, in those years doctors—I’m not kidding—things that you take for granted today. Women who owned their own businesses, and women who were policemen and firemen, and we honored those [women]—it started a tradition that I had every single year.

Every single year that I was in public office I did “Women Making History.” We’ve honored Hillary [Rodham] Clinton, we’ve honored women who were really striving to make inroads in life, and so, yes, that was the first time that

women really came out in, I think in the country, and certainly in California, for women. Because the prejudice was that women didn't want other women. That was the conventional wisdom, quote unquote, that women didn't want women. Now that's not true today, not that every woman gets all the women's votes, but I think it's just there are many, many women who prefer to vote for a woman today. But in those years, it was very hard. You had to prove yourself in ways that you can't imagine. People would ask me about budgeting. I was an economics major. I had been a stockbroker, so economics was one of the things I was interested in, and people couldn't believe it. They thought I was lying when I said I had my degree in economics. {laughter}

WASNIEWSKI: You talked about coming to the House in '83, and by our account there were 22 women in the House.

BOXER: That's all?

WASNIEWSKI: That's all.

BOXER: Oh my God.

WASNIEWSKI: And because there were so few, did you find that the women Members gravitated towards each other?

BOXER: Yes. Yes, they did, just like they did later when I got to the Senate. And I remember one of the great things that was done at the time—Lindy [Corinne Claiborne] Boggs really led the charge on it—we had a Women's Health Equity Act. What year it passed I don't know, but it started very soon after I

came, and each one of us had a little piece of this onto this bill. In those years believe it or not, women were not included in clinical trials. Clinical trials on drugs were being done on men—white men—who, like, weighed 150 pounds, no kidding. So it was ridiculous, and we found out about it, and we said, “Women are not like men. We have different bodies, different hormones, different needs.” And so that was the way we made our mark. We really did focus on that, and we were successful in changing the law.

But there were so few of us it was pathetic, and we suffered a lot of prejudice. I remember—and I write about it in my book—when I was on the Merchant Marine and Fisheries Committee, which no longer exists, I had a bill to protect the baby seals; they were being clubbed to death. And anyway, the good news is that bill passed, became law, but the bad news is during the debate, there was so much sexism. One colleague said, “I want to associate myself with the remarks of my colleague,” which is perfectly appropriate. And then he said, “Well, as a matter of fact, I want to associate with my colleague.” And the chairman chimed in and said, “Me too.” I turned bright red, and the whole place laughed. It was so awful. When it was over, I went to see the chairman—he was a Democratic chairman from the South—and I said, “I can’t tell you how terrible it was for me, that moment, how embarrassing—” “Oh, we thought we were giving you a compliment.” And I think he was sincere. It was a time of great change, the early ’80s. And so we struck all that from the record because I said I just don’t want any of that in the record.

JOHNSON: When you first came to Congress, and again there were so few women, but did any of the veteran women Members serve as a mentor or offer you advice, maybe, on how to handle situations like that?

BOXER:

I would say Lindy Boggs. What Lindy was good at is that she would recommend these types of bills that we could work on together, and that was one of them. I remember Bella [Savitsky] Abzug was there, and she kept trying to get me to travel abroad on the condition of women in the world.³ She kept saying, “You’re the one who should do this.” And I said, “Well, I can’t travel the world. I’ve got my family, I’m here, and I want to focus on problems in the American people.” And she wasn’t thrilled about that. She wanted to get me more interested in international women’s issues, which later, when I was in the Senate, I did take on that issue.

But I would say Lindy Boggs was the mentor. If there was a mentor, she was—I wouldn’t say a mentor, I’d say she was a great role model because she was very kind, and she was inclusive, and she knew how to work across the aisle and across the gender divide. And so watching her, I’d say I learned quite a bit. She’s charming and just sincere about her work. So I would say she came the closest to me. I became very friendly with Barbara Mikulski, and Barbara also was a great role model because she had a great sense of humor. She would say, “You know, Barbara, there’s a lot of guys here. Some of them forget about us. Some of them are Sir Galahads, and those are the ones you want to work with.”

WASNIEWSKI:

One of the stories that we came across again and again in reading profiles about your background was the movement to integrate the House Gym.

BOXER:

Yes. {laughter}

WASNIEWSKI: We're wondering if you can tell us that story a little bit because I think people nowadays wouldn't believe you if you told them. It's a completely different environment.

BOXER: Well, it's the best story. And I give a lot of speeches, and I tell this story. Yes, when I got there from California—California was very exercise-minded, and I was used to working out, taking long walks, and working out in a gym. So I tried to go to the gym, and they said, "You can't go to the main gym, but there's a women's gym." So I said, "Oh, good, there's a women's gym. Where is it?" "Well, we'll show it to you." So, as I explained in the book, I go there, it's like, 10-foot by 8-foot space and mostly with hairdryers. And I couldn't believe it, but I thought, "Okay, this is what we've got."

So a friend of mine came, and we did aerobic exercises. My friend Claudette came out there; she's a guru, exercise guru. So we all line up, and we hardly have any room. Olympia [Jean] Snowe comes, Gerry Ferraro comes, everybody comes in their best clothes except for me and Barbara—we were in sweats—and Claudette says, "Okay everybody, put your hands on your hips." Oh no, "put your hands on your waist," and with that, Mikulski yells out, "If I had a waist I wouldn't be here." And of course everyone gets hysterical, and we realize we could never do this. It was this tiny little room.

So I was bound and determined to get a gym, and I tried everything. I went to everybody. They all said, "No, no, no." And I went to Danny [Daniel David] Rostenkowski because he was taking up a great big room next to the men's gym, which we could have used, but {laughter} he'd store—you're not going to believe this—Helene Curtis products. Helene Curtis was this big, they made shampoo, and all of these amenities, and they gave him all this

stuff to give out as Christmas gifts to the staff, something that obviously we're not allowed to do anymore. But he said, "No, I need that room for the Helene Curtis Christmas gifts," and I sort of gave up.

But I knew I had to use a sense of humor, so I wrote a song and I put together a singing group of Marcy [Marcia Carolyn] Kaptur, Mary Rose Oakar, and myself. And to make a long story short, we sang it to the [Democratic] Caucus, to Tip [Thomas Philip] O'Neill [Jr.] and to the caucus, and we said, "Exercise, glamorize, where to go? Will you advise? Can't everybody use your gym? And equal rights, we'll wear tights, let's avoid those macho fights. Can't everybody use your gym?" Anyway, you can find those lyrics; they're in my book. So to make a long story short, they said, "Okay already, it's fine." So what I found is you can use a sense of humor, and we got into the gym.

Now, once we got into the gym, they then said, "Well, you can only use it on the weekends." And we said, "No, no." And they said, "Well, you can only use it certain hours." And we said, "No." And we said, "We're going to go public with this." And they finally said, "Okay." So we got into the gym. And I'm very happy—it's something that I personally took on and won using a sense of humor because in those years the angry woman was not going to get anywhere. {laughter} That was the way it was.

WASNIEWSKI: Yes, having that sense of humor is something else that Pat Schroeder used quite often, too.

BOXER: Yes. She said, "I have a uterus as well as a brain." I mean, yes, you had to and I find I still do, but in those years, you had to because if you were angry

people would say, “Oh, I don’t want to deal with her.” So you had to be funny, and you had to be—it was tough then to get equal treatment. You just couldn’t get equal treatment, that was the thing. And the problem in the House, which is different in the Senate, is that it takes so long to get seniority in the House, and women weren’t there for so long. Think about it, just there were so few. And you didn’t have women in high positions at all, in any positions of power. In the Senate, after I was there for just a couple of years I got a subcommittee chairmanship, a full committee chairmanship in about 10 or 12 years, which my colleagues also have now, my Senate colleagues, because it’s a smaller institution, and it’s just easier to move up the ladder. But those years we were really at the mercy of the leadership and of our committee chairs if we wanted to get anything done. So you had to use every way you could without threatening anybody because you were a woman to win their hearts and get what you wanted, you know.

WASNIEWSKI: That’s a fine line to walk.

BOXER: Very hard. But, look, when you grew up in the times I grew up in—remember, I went to Wall Street, I wasn’t even able to sell stocks until I begged. I mean, it was hard. You can’t believe it. They said, “Women don’t sell stocks. You can be a secretary.” And I’ll tell you the most shocking part of it all as I went along was I didn’t question it. I just knew it was just a hard struggle. I give tremendous credit to the women’s movement of the ’70s, because without that, I don’t know where we’d be. Because the women there, they were a little older than I, say 10 years older, they were just so strong and said, “Don’t give up. Fight for your rights.” They got called out as being militant and all the rest, but without that, I wouldn’t have run a second time after I lost the first time. Imagine—I have 40 years in elected life—if I hadn’t

run the second time, I would have missed out on 40 years of elected life that I really liked. But I read that article. I can't express it to you enough what it meant to say, "It's okay. It's not your fault. You were ahead of your time, and you got to give it at least one or two more chances." And now we see the women of today: they're so confident. It really makes me so happy, you know, to see it.

JOHNSON: Definitely an inspiration. We asked you earlier about John Burton, and we're also wondering about Phil [Phillip] Burton. We know you served briefly with him and what your impressions were of him?

BOXER: I did. It was all too brief because he died—if you want to check—I think it was three months after I got there. Could you check right now and see when he died? Because I got there in '83. I have this recollection he died right after I got there. Maybe I'm wrong. Could have been longer.

WASNIEWSKI: That sounds right. I think he died later in '83 [April 10].

BOXER: Oh my God. So Phil was a towering presence, and he was a power broker of the first order. And when John called me and asked me to run for his seat, Phil wasn't thrilled about it at all. And Phil said to me—and I have to give him credit—"You were not my first choice," he said. {laughter} I said, "Oh," and he said, "But I'm going to really help you." And I said, "That's great." Well, he said, "I will raise all the money you need." And I said, "That's wonderful," but guess what happened? Someone named Milton Marks ran against Phil, and Phil had a horrible election, and he couldn't help me at all—not one bit.

So there I was, John wasn't well, there was not much John could do to raise money. He had to take care of himself. Phil was in a terrible race—terrible—and he was afraid he was going to lose that race, and so I was out there on my own. So money raising was really terrible. But in those years, all you needed was \$150,000—I would say to run \$150 [thousand] to let's say \$250 [thousand]. And so I was able to do it, eke it out. It was terrible. It was so hard. I had never raised anything. The most I raised up until that point for supervisor was about \$10,000. {laughter} I'm not kidding. And we didn't have any money in those years, none, to put up. So it was very, very daunting.

So I would say Phil was a towering presence. He was formidable. I knew I wasn't his favorite or his first choice. He had asked another guy, a really good guy, to run, who turned it down. And so in a way I wanted to prove to Phil that I could be good and do a good job, but Phil died so soon into it I can't tell you. And then his wife, Sala [Galante Burton], took his seat, and then she got very sick, and she died, and on her deathbed said, "I support Nancy Pelosi." And the rest is history. And I think Sala must have died just a few years after Phil. I want to say Nancy came in—did Nancy come in in '87 or '88?

JOHNSON: Eighty-seven.

WASNIEWSKI: June of '87, yes.

BOXER: There you go. And I came in in '83. And, well, I won't get ahead of you, but we became very close.

WASNIEWSKI: Did you work closely with Sala Burton? Did you get to know her well?

BOXER: Sure. Sure I did because we had the horrible AIDS crisis that hit just when Phil died, and everything was coming, exploding. And I represented about a quarter of San Francisco. So San Francisco was ridden with this crisis, and I definitely worked very closely with Sala and worked very hard to get the first funding for AIDS/HIV prevention and research. We didn't know what it was. Then it was AIDS. They didn't know it was HIV until they discovered the virus.

So, yes, we were thrown together in an emergency situation. We worked very well together. And all of a sudden, so many people got so sick and died that she, she and Phil—had known all those years gay men that had worked for them over the years. It was just a very, very hard time.

And when Sala died and I was the only one left there for a period of time until Nancy came having to have the AIDS crisis essentially on my back because I had to do something. People were just dying like flies. It was awful. And I wrote a lot about that in my book too, what it was like and how I had to go to Bill [William Huston] Natcher, who was then the chairman of Appropriations, and explain to him this disease. And coming from, I think it was Kentucky, I mean, nobody was out of the closet then in those years in those southern states, and I thought he was going to turn me away. Instead, he said something to the effect of, "Barbara, I see how upset you are. I know this is terrible. I don't care who's getting sick. It's not right." And he gave us our first amount of money. And Henry [Arnold] Waxman and I were kind of the people who were pushing the envelope on AIDS research. Of course,

eventually, it became in the billions, but it started off I remember \$12 million, and we were so happy to have it to find out what this was.

It was, I would say, the AIDS crisis really catapulted me into being a better legislator because I had to do it because I knew people were dying. And I had to take on the Reagan administration and give speeches against them because Reagan would not say the word AIDS until his friend Rock Hudson died. Then he said, “Okay, it was okay to talk about it.” So it was a lonely, hard thing, and Phil died right away—he would have taken the lead—and I had to step up. And then Sala died, and then Nancy came. Nancy and I had an amazing working relationship and friendship that developed.

JOHNSON: Can you talk a little bit more about that? Because you knew Nancy Pelosi before she went on to rise on the leadership ladder and become Speaker. What was your working relationship like in the House?

BOXER: Of course. Well, we were really close, close friends because we both represented San Francisco at the time of AIDS. She had never held office before. She had led the Democratic Party and was a great organizer and a great Democrat, and she had raised all these kids, so it took her a while before she was ready to run for office. So when she came in, I had been there a few years, so obviously I introduced her to everyone that I became friendly with.

We had a group that used to go out to dinner every Wednesday night—I think it was Wednesday night—and then she was part of the group. I integrated the group, then I brought Nancy in, and Barbara Kennelly in, and others, but it was all men at first. And it was a terrific group of people. Pretty

diverse group of people, including Republicans and Democrats, and we'd go out. I'm trying to remember if it was—Tuesday night I think it was. We went out every Tuesday night. And so we became fast friends. And I'm looking at a picture that I'm going to send you just for fun, not for anything else, it's a picture of us dressed as the Andrews sisters, {laughter} and it is so funny, and I am going to send it to you. And I have it; I just love it. We would do charitable things together. But one of the things that really annoyed us is whenever we went anywhere to events, the men would introduce us as the two women who represent San Francisco. It was incredible—Congresswomen Boxer and Pelosi. I mean, really? So we had a lot that we would laugh about, and cry about, and all that.

WASNIEWSKI: We're wondering—kind of stepping back and looking at the California delegation at that time—what were your impressions of the delegation, and did it meet regularly? Did it work closely as a group?

BOXER: Well, the Democrats met for breakfast—this is something Phil Burton started—every Wednesday. I'm taking this picture. You have to see this picture. {laughter} I don't understand why I'm getting this shadow on it. Okay. Okay, wait, now I'm going to email it to you. That's all right. Let's keep doing. Okay.

WASNIEWSKI: So we were just talking a little bit about the California delegation, and you said there was a regular breakfast that Phil Burton had?

BOXER: Yes, we had a breakfast every Wednesday morning. It was really good. And here's an interesting little side bar. The only person who came who wasn't from California was Harry Reid from Nevada. Because Phil always felt

terrible that Harry didn't have any colleagues who were Democrats from Nevada, {laughter} so he was the only one. So Phil said, "Harry, you're part of our delegation," and that's how I became very close with Harry. And little did I know he'd be my leader in the Senate all those years later. It's funny how that worked out.

But it was very good, and Phil died so I couldn't really see him in action more than a couple of times—couple of months—but it was basically to keep us coalesced, keep us together, and it was—you had friendship bonds, you know. It was good. Did you get that [email] yet?

WASNIEWSKI: Yes.

JOHNSON: We did. {laughter}

WASNIEWSKI: As you were talking the picture showed up. That's quite a picture.

BOXER: Isn't that hysterical? {laughter}

JOHNSON: That's fantastic.

BOXER: I know. But that shows you, we were so friendly, and we hung out together, and we did all these events together. That was for a charity.

WASNIEWSKI: That's great. That's great. Thank you so much.

JOHNSON: Thank you. That made my day. {laughter}

BOXER: I know. I have it right when you walk in my house. Oh, you'll be interested to know, when you walk in—I brought a lot of my memorabilia back. I also gave it to UC Berkeley, but I kept certain photographs. So when you walk into my home, there are three photos that are from my office. They're black and white. One is Geraldine Ferraro and me when Gerry got to be VP candidate. One is Jackie Robinson sliding into second base, and it says, "A life is not important except in the impact it has on other lives, Jackie Robinson." That was his slogan. And this picture of Nancy and me.
{laughter}

WASNIEWSKI: That's great.

BOXER: So that's memories that I have that—I love those memories. But anyhow, so yes, the breakfasts were good. They were brilliant. Look, one of the things I learned in the House that served me so well, which I had learned on the board of supervisors, which is you need to have a majority to win. And in order to do that, you've got to win trust of people. You've got to show them that you're a person of your word. You give your word; it's your bond. These are all the things I learned that served me well. I was able to get a lot done because I had learned those lessons.

JOHNSON: I know we don't have a lot of time, but we want to make sure we cover some important parts of your career. We know you were an outspoken supporter of a woman's right to choose. Do you think that the pro-choice/pro-life debate hindered the efforts of women Members at all to work together on issues affecting other women?

BOXER:

Well, most of the women were pro-choice, so it actually served as a bond and brought us together. Very few women that I remember on the Democratic side, very few weren't pro-choice. And if they were anti-choice, they weren't fervently so. So I think on the contrary, I think one of the things that bonded women together was this notion that we should be able to defend, we should be able to make decisions, as long as they're legal, about our own bodies. And we were mostly all major supporters of *Roe v. Wade*. So I think it was a uniting aspect. And nobody ever got more angry than the women when the men would come down and try to—and the men were the ones who were taking the lead against us. It was never a woman. I don't know any women in those years—now there may be some—who actually took the lead against choice. It was mostly men, and it got people really mad. So I think it served as a uniting force.

JOHNSON:

And you authored and sponsored the first Violence Against Women Act in the House, and this was in 1991. Can you walk us through your involvement with this legislation?

BOXER:

Yes. I was greatly honored because Joe [Joseph Robinette] Biden [Jr.] had asked me to—he knew me—and he asked if I would carry it in the House. He was the author in the Senate. And of course I was thrilled. When I realized that every few seconds a woman gets beaten up, I just said, “Oh my God. I want to do something about it.” So I was able to get a couple of pieces of it through that related to college campuses, lighting on college campuses, and some rape hotlines. We got very little done in the House, but we got a little bit done. Then when I got to the Senate in the '90s, later, '93, Joe said would I help him? And of course I was proud to help him, and we pretty much got it done.

WASNIEWSKI: And you were—also another big episode in your career was you were one of a group of Congresswomen who marched to the Senate in 1991.

BOXER: Yes.

WASNIEWSKI: Women coming from the House to urge that Anita Hill have the opportunity to testify about then-Supreme Court Nominee Clarence Thomas. Can you tell us what you remember about that event? Was it planned, or was it spontaneous?

BOXER: I remember everything about that event. {laughter} It was so meaningful. It was spontaneous, but it was Pat's idea—Schroeder. 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 [Anita Hill] 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, he won't continue," because she was so believable and so professional and so controlled and so bright. And so I thought, "Well, 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 none were on the [Judiciary] Committee. 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 [John] 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. {laughter} I was fast. Nothing to do with—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—and 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, {laughter} 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.” So we did see George.

Well, there’s a big movie about the Anita Hill situation. I don’t know if you saw it. It’s beautifully done, but they don’t have this right. In their version, they have us getting into the Senate lunch. They were all having lunch, and it was a Tuesday. And they were having lunch, and they did not let us in the lunch. George saw us separately. But the movie says we got into the lunch, and we tried to lobby—that was just made up.

But, yes, it was something I'll never forget. And, of course, once they, well, everything is history once they denied Anita's claims and said, "No, we're going to do this," that really led to the "Year of the Woman." So without Anita having the courage of her convictions, and without those of us walking over, I never would have made it to the Senate ever because no one really knew in the country how few women there were. And I had many male supporters, who started off not supporting me, who when they saw the Senate said, "Oh my God, never realized there were so few women in the Senate. I'm going to back you and Dianne," because Dianne was running at the time. So it was, I would say, it was impactful is an understatement. Without that situation, I never would have made it. I just wouldn't have.

JOHNSON:

In the moments when you were marching to the Senate and then also just the aftermath, did you and your women colleagues realize how big this was, such a big moment in history?

BOXER:

I don't think so. I don't think so. We did know people were watching, and we did afterwards see that iconic photo of us, like the Hiroshima photo, it was all over the place. But at the time, not really. We were just mad. We just were mad, and we thought, "This can't be right. You know, this woman has made serious charges, and they're going to just ignore it?" So, no, I can't say at all that it was in any way such a big thunderbolt, but obviously afterwards, when the hearings took place, and people saw how miserably she was treated, and they didn't see one minority on the panel, and they didn't see one woman on the panel, people just said, "This is crazy." And it did give women who were running a big lift. And as I say, we tripled our numbers in the Senate. We went from two to six, {laughter} but it was a tripling. Yes.

JOHNSON: Which was huge at the time.

BOXER: It was huge. If we tripled them now, we'd be in great shape. We'd have a strong majority. So it was huge at the time. They called it the "Year of the Woman," and we didn't have another one until this year, to be honest, in terms of how I think there's more than 100—right—more than 100 women now in the House?

WASNIEWSKI: There will be.

BOXER: Yes.

WASNIEWSKI: We're going to be up around 106, somewhere in that neighborhood. This current Congress we've got about 90, 92.

JOHNSON: Ninety-one right now.

BOXER: I know Republicans lost about 15 women, but Democrats brought so many women. And we just need them in both parts—this is just off topic, but we just, if we're going to have a representative government, you've got to have half women. I don't mean exactly half, but you've got to—you have to have Representatives of all religions, all race—otherwise, we don't have a meaningful government. Because what I did find out when I got to the House, and I saw when there were women around the table, the conversation took a different turn, not because women are better—I've never believed that for a minute—but we're equal, and we see the world through our lens, and you cannot have a representative government that claims to be representative, but you don't have a representation of the whole body politic. It's just crazy.

JOHNSON: When Matt and I were preparing for this interview, preparing to talk to you, we noticed that in many articles, people for years—since you first started running—were trying to define your political style. So some of the adjectives that I pulled out were feisty, tenacious, energetic, and scrappy. But how would you describe your political style over the years and especially in the House?

BOXER: You know, I would say I tried to be authentic. I don't know how else—what's the word? And I do get when I'd see something terrible happening, I do get emotional about it, I do get sad, I do get angry, and I always showed it. So whatever I was feeling, I tried to show. I didn't hide my feelings. I wore them, like, on my sleeve. I've always done that, and that subjected me to a lot of criticism. "Well, it's not professional." Well, I always said, "If I ever stopped feeling, I wouldn't be good at my job." So I would say—just showed my feelings. I showed my emotions, and that's the way I always was. I didn't worry about it.

So, yes, a lot of times I was feisty because I was upset about something and I had to talk about it, so, I don't know. I don't know if I'm saying it right, but that's the only thing I could say. I would get very upset if there was mistreatment of children, and I wasn't about to hide how I felt, you know.

WASNIEWSKI: You've been very generous with your time. We just have a few more questions. Retrospective. One of which is why in the end did you decide to leave the House and seek election for the Senate?

BOXER: Sure. Why did I? What a good question. I have a great answer {laughter} because I wrote about it. Two words: Newt [Newton Leroy] Gingrich. I had

to get away from him. I thought he was bringing ugliness, personally destructive methods. I didn't want to be near that poison atmosphere, and so I thought, you know what, I'm going up, or I'm going out. And that was the truth. I just couldn't stand it. {laughter}

WASNIEWSKI: And this was even before he'd come into the Speakership.

BOXER: Oh yes, but he was in the leadership. Because he was leading all those bad things that were—he was behind the scenes leading everything, and giving the language out, and doing all the things that he did. And I just saw him coming. I saw it coming, and it wasn't something I wanted.

And the other thing about me that I've noticed is that I just know when I want to hold them and when I want to fold them, you know? I don't do things forever. I never was interested in being pulled out of the Senate right to the nursing home. You know, I wanted a stop in between, {laughter} and so I got out. And people said, "Why are you getting out? California's a blue state." But I did this work for so long, and I wanted to stop at the top of my game.

But in terms of the House, I didn't like what was happening. Because when I got there, it was—even though it wasn't that hospitable to women, they thought they were being hospitable, but it was a place of collegiality. All you had to do was look at Tip O'Neill and Robert [Henry] Michel and the friendships and across the aisle and our dinners were across the aisle, and all of that. I saw that all changing, and I wasn't interested in that type of life, being in constant hand-to-hand personal combat. It wasn't anything I wanted.

WASNIEWSKI: And to date, there have only been about a dozen women who have served in both the House and the Senate, so you have a pretty unique perspective—how would you compare the difference between the role that women play in the House versus in the Senate? Or is there a difference?

BOXER: Oh, it's a huge difference. The difference is even as a freshman in the Senate, you have so much more power. You have as much power as committee chairmen have in the House. So it's an instant powerful position. Why do I say that? One Senator can hold up everything. One Senator could stop everything. And so much is done by unanimous consent. So when I went to the Senate, and I said one of my lines was, "The bad news is Jesse Helms can stop everything until he gets what he wants. The good news is so can I when I get there." I was known to do that. I was feisty. So there's a lot more power invested in every Senator from the minute they get there if you really know the rules, and of course I was learning the rules very quickly because I served so much in the House it was very helpful. But it's a very different place. But I'd say more power, it's only 100 people, right, compared to 435. It's a very different place.

JOHNSON: Do you have an example of another difference?

BOXER: You represent the whole state. For me, that's a titanic difference. To represent—in California we have 40 million people now. When I went, I bet we had about 18 million or less, something like that—can you imagine?—compared to half a million that I represented. So how's that for a difference? So what an honor it was for me to go all over the state. I got to meet everybody from Silicon Valley, to Hollywood, to the dissents, the establishment that was here when I first got elected—it got much smaller

later—all the learning institutions, the great research hospitals. It's a much bigger job in a state like mine. Some states, frankly, it's not that different if you have a state with a million people, it's similar to being in the House. Twice as big. But for me it was 100 times as big, and you had to know so many more issues than you even thought you could possibly know.

JOHNSON: Matt had mentioned how unique this position is because only 12 women have served in the House and the Senate. Do you think it's more difficult for women Representatives to get elected to the Senate?

BOXER: Well, it was for years. I think that's all changed, and we've got two new—we've got three women who have just won their seats, and two who have lost their seats. We have now Arizona, Nevada, and we had a couple of losses, and, well, we have the woman who just won in Mississippi [Cindy Hyde-Smith]. So I think women have an equal chance right now for the Senate, but I think in my day, absolutely. When I ran, they said, "Never going to happen—two women. Never going to happen—two women." And we became the first two women in history ever to represent any state in the union—Dianne and I—and we got elected the same day. It's amazing. And two Jewish women from the Bay Area, everyone said it could never happen, {laughter} and it did happen.

And so after we got elected and we were the first, then Maine had two women Senators, and then suddenly Washington State had two Senators, New Hampshire had two Senators. It was amazing, after Dianne and I, so that was a wonderful thing that happened. But I do think—look, it's harder for—let me say this. It is hard for anyone to get elected to the Senate, male or

female, right? But I don't think it's any harder for a woman than a man today. Was it harder then? Yes.

JOHNSON: And what about specifically that path from the House to the Senate that many male Members have been able to do? Do you think it's harder for a woman to make that jump from the House to the Senate?

BOXER: Not now. Not now. Then yes. Years ago, yes, but no, I think the tide has turned today, and I think today a woman has just a good a chance if not a better chance. I think we just proved it with Jackie [Jacklyn Sheryl] Rosen, and Kyrsten Sinema, okay? There you go. Two right there.

JOHNSON: Right.

BOXER: So, no, I think today we're good. When I ran, it was very hard, just because it was another groundbreaker.

WASNIEWSKI: We've asked all the interviewees that we've spoken to, you know, a lot of retrospective questions, but we've asked everyone to prognosticate, and I want to ask you the same question. There are now 114 women in this Congress. There's going to be about 130 in the next Congress. How many do you think are going to be in Congress when we get to the 150th anniversary of Jeannette Rankin's swearing into the House? That's going to be in 2067. And then, also, how will that come about?

BOXER: Oh, I think we're going to see a majority of women in the House and Senate. I think it's going to come about because women are really good at this work. It's work that, you know, fits our sensibilities: caring about other people,

balancing different priorities, not so interested in taking the credit. I mean, all those things that I think women bring are very special, and I'm very optimistic that we'll see in the House and Senate, we will definitely see a majority.

WASNIEWSKI: And what advice would you offer or have you offered—I assume you've offered it many times before—to women who are thinking about running for Congress?

BOXER: If you're a person that likes to solve problems, if you're a person who's good at prioritizing, if you're a person who's also good at multitasking, and you like people, this is a great job. It's a great job. And you're going to widen your horizons because you're going to meet people from all over the country—from the deep south, to the coasts, and everything in between, rural, urban, suburban, everything—and I just think it's a great honor, and a privilege, and it's hard, and it's worth doing. But you do have to have special qualities that you have to look deep inside yourself to make sure you can handle it all because it's a messy job, and you wake up in the morning and you have no idea what is going to be hitting me today.

There's one more thing I'll add to the other question, which is the reason I think there'll be more women is—and it's not {laughter} it's not an encouraging point about society—but I think some of our problems are going to be so intense, problems that come about from artificial intelligence and job losses and disruptions in the economy and terrible climate change problems that women are always called upon when things get bad. "Okay, let's let the women help us out of this." So I think another reason I'm bullish on women is I'm also concerned about a lot of our problems, and women are

good problem solvers, and I think people will turn to them when things get worse and worse in certain areas. So, just a thought.

WASNIEWSKI: Okay.

JOHNSON: I just have one last question for you. In terms of your service in the House, what do you think your lasting legacy will be?

BOXER: Oh gosh. Well, I think it has to be the Anita Hill, part of that women's march has got to be a legacy, my pro-choice work, saving the dolphins—which I had, the tuna labeling bill was my bill—the Violence Against Women Act. I think those are some of the things. And the last thing is preserving the coast. We fought so hard to include protections for the California coast, and we never lost those protections to this day, even now, so those are some of the things.

JOHNSON: And that was just a decade's worth of work there. {laughter}

BOXER: Oh, yes.

WASNIEWSKI: Well, thank you so much. We could talk to you in great detail for a long time, but we know we have to let you go.

BOXER: Well, thank you a million times over. I'm really glad you're doing this, and I hope that it will make some colorful memories for people because that's a thing. Things change, and you want to capture what it was like. And I'm glad you got my picture. If you see Nancy, show it to her. She'll get hysterical. She

knows that picture well. {laughter} I put it in my book actually. Anyway, show it to her if you see her.

WASNIEWSKI: Thank you so much. We will.

JOHNSON: We will. Thank you.

BOXER: All right. Take care. Bye.

NOTES

¹ The Office of the Historian conducted a phone interview from the House Recording Studio in Washington, DC, with Senator Boxer, who was in her California home.

² Barbara Boxer, *The Art of Tough: Fearlessly Facing Politics and Life* (New York: Hachette Books, 2016).

³ Bella Abzug, of New York, served in the U.S. House of Representatives from 1971 to 1977.