

by Andrea Lewis

Barbara Lee

“Barbara Lee speaks for me.”

That simple phrase—with plain white text on a black background—began appearing on Bay Area bumper stickers shortly after Congresswoman Barbara Lee cast a lone vote against President Bush and his desire to wage war without restraint in the fall of 2001. For progressives, especially those in Northern California, Lee was a singular, sane voice. Others with more conservative political views slammed Lee, some going as far as sending her death threats.

Barbara Lee is no longer a lone voice. A growing chorus on both sides of the Congressional aisle and many others around the country are now openly critical of the Bush Administration’s policies. Not only did Lee persevere through those difficult times, she has expanded her role as one of the nation’s most respected progressive politicians.

Barbara Lee was born into a military family in El Paso, Texas. She briefly received public assistance as a young single mother of two while attending Mills

Andrea Lewis is a San Francisco-based journalist who was recently named a Stanford University Knight Journalism Fellow for 2007-2008.

College in Oakland. It was there that she became involved with the Black Panther Party, volunteering at a local community center the party ran. When Panther co-founder Bobby Seale ran for mayor of Oakland in 1973, Lee helped out with the campaign.

Lee's political career is closely tied to that of Ron Dellums, the former Congressman who is currently mayor of Oakland. Lee started as an intern in Dellums's office, and eventually became his chief of staff. After serving in the California state assembly from 1990 to 1996, and the state senate from 1996 to 1998, she was first elected to the U.S. Congress in a special election in 1998 to fill Dellums's Congressional seat after his retirement.

As dissatisfaction with the Bush Administration and the Republican leadership has continued to grow, Lee's star within the Democratic Party has steadily risen. She joined the House Appropriations Committee (which controls the federal purse strings) earlier this year, and also serves on the Labor, Health and Human Services, Education Subcommittee, the Foreign Operations Subcommittee, and the Legislative Branch Subcommittee. Lee is also a co-chair of the Congressional Progressive Caucus, first vice-chair of the Congressional Black Caucus, and a senior Democratic whip.

In person, Barbara Lee is poised and confident, but she also radiates a surprisingly down-to-earth, unassuming air. She can generate applause simply by entering a public gathering, and is a major draw at local events focusing on everything from AIDS to peacemaking.

You can still see the "Barbara Lee Speaks for Me" bumper stickers on vehicles around the Bay Area, and though some of them are now a bit faded, the support for Barbara Lee's courage and integrity is stronger than ever.

After half a dozen postponements and reschedules, I spoke with Barbara Lee by telephone on a busy day in Congress.

Q • Can you comment on the Iraq War funding bill that passed in May?

Barbara Lee: Sure, we had probably 160 or 170 votes against it. Unfortunately, we didn't have enough votes to kill it. That was very disappointing. I think it was a step backward. And for those of us who are committed, like a majority of the American people are, to ending this occupation and bringing the troops home, it did remind us of how much work there still is left to do. The notion that we were going to give him another blank check to continue this failed policy at a cost of thousands of American lives and untold Iraqi lives is just wrong, and people know that, and

sooner or later I think we'll have the votes to stop it. There is a real struggle within our Democratic caucus. I have to give the Speaker a lot of credit: She's been able to pull together, for the most part, a majority of the caucus to be committed to finding a way to end this occupation and civil war.

Q: How do you think we'll be able to get out of Iraq?

Lee: The next step is to fully fund withdrawal. That was my amendment, which we couldn't get a vote on last time. Here's the money to fully fund withdrawal, and to fully fund protecting the troops, which we must do, because there's going to be chaos, and also to fully fund a major diplomatic effort in the region and a reconstruction effort that is for real, that allows Iraqis to get involved in taking back their country. This is the only way I see an out. Many said, "Oh, you want to cut the funding from under our troops." That's not what we're talking about. We're talking about stopping the funding to wage this unbelievable occupation that has created a civil war. We're talking about funding to protect them and bring them home.

Q: Another argument is that Al Qaeda will be strengthened and will claim victory if the United States withdraws. What is your response to that?

Lee: The Bush Administration needs to be honest. There already is a civil war, and we created it, first of all. Second of all, Al Qaeda is there. The war, the occupation, the bombing, the destruction of that country created a real haven for Al Qaeda. That's happening. And that is the result of the Bush Administration. And so for them to try to turn around and say we've got to stay there because that might happen is one of their disingenuous positions. The longer we stay there the worse it's going to get. We have to remember: We're digging ourselves deeper in a hole by staying there, and you don't dig yourself out of a hole by digging yourself deeper.

Q: Going back even further, you were the only person in all of Congress to vote against authorizing the Bush Administration's use of force in September 2001. Looking back on that, how do you feel about that vote today?

Lee: It was a resolution that gave the President a blank check to wage an undefined war against an undefined enemy for an undefined period of time. We shouldn't have given him that authority. That was not only authority given to the Bush Administration, that was authority given to any Administration (unless we repeal it, of course, which I doubt if we

will do) to use force in perpetuity as long as they can claim that it's part of the war on terror. It's also been used for domestic surveillance, for spying. It's a resolution that I knew was ripe for abuse. Congress gave up so many of our constitutional duties in terms of declaring war.

Q: Beyond the so-called war on terror, what are some of the issues you are most focused on?

Lee: Well, of course this HIV/AIDS pandemic, both domestic and abroad. It particularly affects communities of color, especially African Americans, women, here at home. And it is ravaging sub-Saharan Africa and the Caribbean, and other regions.

I'm also concerned about economic inequality and the elimination of poverty. Poverty should be an oxymoron here in the richest nation. We're working on legislation to repeal these tax cuts for the wealthy and put the money in poverty-elimination initiatives. And as we do with environmental-impact studies, I want poverty-impact statements on all of our policies. Here in America, thirty-seven million people live in poverty. A large percentage is African American and Latino.

So a lot of what I'm doing here in Congress has to do with closing these gaps: health care disparity gaps, criminal justice gaps in terms of the incarceration rates of young African American boys and men, affordable housing, and funding for education.

Q: Are you backing anyone in the 2008 Presidential race?

Lee: No, I'm listening. I've invited all the candidates to come to my district. Senator Obama came and got a phenomenal response: 15,000 people showed up. I want my constituents to evaluate all of them. Congresswoman Maxine Waters, Lynn Woolsey, and I have gone to Iowa, New Hampshire, Nevada, to the early primary states, to try to help grassroots organizations and voters look at these candidates in the context of where they stand on the occupation, where they stand on poverty, where they stand on global warming, where they stand on education, and, of course, universal health care. I have not endorsed because we're working to try to make sure that all of the candidates have the kind of scrutiny that they deserve.

Q: How long do you see yourself in office?

Lee: Well, you know, I've never really thought about that. I'm focused on the present, and what it really means now to be in the majority. Every day I say, what can I do today to move the progressive agenda forward, to help more progressives and people of color get elect-



“Congress gave the President a blank check to wage an undefined war against an undefined enemy for an undefined period of time. We shouldn't have given him that authority.”

ed to Congress? What I can do everyday to end poverty and end racism? What can I do to put issues on the Democratic agenda that heretofore have been too controversial or wouldn't get addressed because they didn't have a huge constituency? So what I have to do every day is not think about my length of time in office, but what I can do to make this a better world and how I can help my constituents.

Q: Many Americans have become cynical about politics. What would you say to those who have lost some faith in our political system?

Lee: Well, if you lose faith in the political system, guess who runs the show? If you're not at the table, you're not considered. If you don't register to vote, your lives are dictated by those who don't care about human beings but profits. So I don't have any tolerance for people who are cynical. I don't have any tolerance for people who say it doesn't matter. Because

in a democracy, it's those who yell the loudest who get heard. People need to yell, we need to put street heat on elected officials. And trust me: I see every day constituents that yell loud; they get the action. Those that are violent or invisible don't get anything. I encourage young people to come work with me, and really see how this stuff works. And once you see it, you say, "Oh my God, we've got to participate, otherwise we're leaving it up to the others to run the country and the world." That, to me, is totally unacceptable.

Q: When people look back at your political legacy, what do you hope people will say?

Lee: I really don't think about it much. But I hope what I'm doing will change people's lives and make them a little bit better. I hope the kids have a better chance at the future that they deserve, and I hope that the world is a bit more peaceful. ♦

THE PROGRESSIVE'S HIDDEN HISTORY *of the* UNITED STATES 2008 calendar



The Progressive's 2008 Hidden History of the United States calendar is here! Each day features important events from the movement for peace and social justice. And each month features original political art from some of the artists you enjoy every month in *The Progressive*! Order yours today with the form below or online at www.progressive.org.

Yes! Please send me ___ copies of *The Progressive's 2008 Hidden History of the United States* calendar! Each calendar is \$12.95 plus shipping and handling. The shipping charge is \$3.00 for up to 3 calendars, \$6.00 for orders of 4 or more.

NAME (PLEASE PRINT) _____

ADDRESS _____

APARTMENT NUMBER _____

CITY _____

STATE _____

ZIP _____

My payment is enclosed

Credit card  MasterCard Visa

CARD NUMBER _____

EXPIRATION DATE _____

SIGNATURE _____

PLEASE RETURN TO:
Calendars
The Progressive
409 E. Main St.
Madison, WI 53703