

Part III: A Perilous Moment

Boxer surprised many with her decision to not seek another term in 2016. But leaving Congress has not meant leaving public life.

CM: I think one of the things we want to ask you about is your decision to retire in 2016, a lot of people were upset about the decision. It set off a flurry of speculation and competition here in California. And there's a lot of interest in the mechanics of how that worked. First of all, talk about what was the biggest factor in your decision, and then did you inform Gavin Newsom first of the decision? He was the one who came out immediately and said he was going to run for governor. Talk a little bit about this.

BB: I talked to no one but my family. This was a personal decision. And again, it goes back to what I said before. The ability to know what I wanted to do, when I wanted to do it, and how I wanted to do it. I'm not a party person, I never came up because a party asked me to run or...I'm just me. And I just knew I wanted to do other things, I wanted to quit at the top of my game. You don't know what the world holds for you at a certain age. I am doing... I'm still working. I love what I do, doing a lot of stuff in healthcare space. I still do TV, I help other candidates. It's great, it's perfect. And I also am not a king maker, a queen maker, whoever won that primary. It was great.

At a certain point, Kamala [Harris] came to me during that race, when her opponent had pulled out some nasty, nasty cards, and I said, I can't... I'm for you. And so at the end of her race I endorsed her, and it set off a whole flurry of things, including her becoming vice president and Alex Padilla becoming, who I love having that seat that I once held. So you gotta know when to hold them know when to fold them, now people are saying, even though they were mad at me and saying why would you do it? You're at the top of your game you finally have a blue state, because every time I ran, it was hard. Now, it's easier to be a Democrat, but I knew... I had done it, I had worked for 40 years in elected life. I wanted to be with my husband, I wanted to come home to California. I didn't want to be on a plane and I want to continue my work in a different setting, and so that's what I did. And I think it's all good look... As much as you like to think you're the only one who can do something, it's not true. It's not true, other people could step up and do it and do it well.

CM: Right.

BB: That's how I feel.

CM: I'm wondering, you were in the role for decades as US Senator. Were you at all, a little bit disappointed to Kamala Harris running for president just so soon after becoming a US senator.

BB: Yes, yes, I wanted her to stay there because she was good at it. Yeah, I mean this job, the job of US Senators is not chopped liver, it is really important, representing 40 million people. And all the things I've done that... I brought my little book with me in case you would to ask me

What are all your accomplishments we just thank God you're not going there... Down that road. I brought it because there are so many things I've done, and even I was amazed because you're just living in the day, in the day, in the day. And then when I sat down to write the book, I asked my chief of staff, would you just pull out all the amendments that I got done and everything I got done. And it was a thousand, one thousand things, and I said, I said, I'm going to pick out the top 50 things and put them in my book. So yes, I think the job of United States senator is incredibly important. One of the people who said that finally toward the end of his life was Ted Kennedy. Because he had tried to run for president, and he said, you know what, a stay in the Senate. He did so many things in the Senate.

CM: Aside from your work in politics, you've published a number of books, including your first novel.

BB: Yeah.

[laughter]

CM: I don't know where you had the time to do that, but are you working on any more at this point or?

BB: No. I keep flirting with the idea of talking about how to just sort of how to stay vibrant and stay... I don't want to say young, you can't stay young, and I say vibrant and important and relevant. But I think other people do that. I don't know, I may or may not, I don't know. But the way I did those novels, first of all, I teamed up with a woman who knew how to write novels, which was very important.

CM: Right.

BB: I really liked to work with her, but what I did was I wrote on the plane rides. because it was five or six hours and you know how it is when you go in the zone.

CM: Yes.

BB: And you can write for... And so I did everything by hand, everything on yellow legal pads. And that's how I did it. But it was fun. It was fun to do, to write a couple of novels, but the book that I really liked the best is my last one. I was able to write about other people like Harry Reid, who was so misjudged by the press and other people, who say, "What is he doing?" He was the greatest leader, but you couldn't tell that by looking from...

CM: You talk about Mitch McConnell how you didn't talk to him for years.

BB: I didn't for 20 years. I couldn't talk to him because of the [Bob] Packwood case where he threatened me if I pursued it. We kicked him out. We were close to kicking him out and he left because of all his sexual harassment and abuse of people, of women. And Mitch McConnell,

Bob Dole called me in the most partisan person he ever met because I was going after Packwood.

CM: You're right.

BB: It had nothing to do with it. Packwood and I agreed on a lot of issues, but he had that secret crazy life.

CM: That's right.

BB: Where he was going after these women and it was horrifying.

CM: And you talked about John McCain who screamed at you and...

BB: Oh God yes.

CM: Do you think the behavior you describe, it's a little crazy with McCain.

BB: Yeah.

CM: Do men get away with that more than women in Washington?

BB: I don't know. I don't know now. There are some crazy women in the Congress right now, and you know I want to make a point, I have never said women are better, I don't believe women are better, I believe we are equal, I believe we are equal. So I don't know how they treat their staff. But no, John McCain and I had the strangest relationship because we were either hugging or he was yelling at me. And he banned me from his committee for something that he didn't like. It was over a government censorship, and we were talking about Schindler's List, and I said it was so important for people to see it, even though yes, they were scenes of naked people on. And that it was important to see it. They should see it with their parents, but it was so important. And I mentioned someone, I think it was representative Coburn who disagreed with me. And all I said was he disagreed. And oh my God, John got mad at me. And he was the chairman of the committee at the time in Congress. And he came over me and said, "you are a banned for my committee." I said, what are you talking about? Because you mentioned his name. I said, I didn't mention in a bad way. Just said, here we are two people who are equal, who see it differently. And he kept screaming and I was going to go up and tell the press, because I thought something is wrong. Guess who stopped me? Joe Biden. And Joe said, "what happened?" And I told him, he said, "oh, that's John. Once in a while, John gets upset like that. He doesn't mean it." He said, "I'll have him write a note to you. Don't do it." I said, "okay, Joe." That was Joe. He was the peacemaker.

CM: When you look at Biden today, what's your thoughts? When you talk about going out on top, I mean, a lot of Democrats are expressing concern about him running, in 2024, your thoughts?

BB: Well number one it's up to him. Number two, he's at the top of his game right now. Which is crazy. If we had done this interview a few weeks earlier, I would've gone, oh my God. But here's how I look at 2024. Right now we're sitting in 2022 as we talk, so it's a long way away. So I don't know. If he's very popular in 2024, I hope he runs. If he's not, I hope he doesn't. That's how I look at it. I'm just pragmatic. We have to win because Republicans have gone rogue on us and gone so right wing. They, I'm afraid we'll lose our democracy and our freedom. So whoever is the strongest candidate I'm going to push for.

CM: I know we're going to have to wrap up for conversation soon. I wanted to ask you, in 2020 you did join the Washington lobbying firm Mercury Public Affairs. What made you make that move? What do you hope? What, you made headlines on that one too. Because there was some work involving a Chinese firm. Talk about that.

BB: Well the Chinese firm never happened. Because I wanted to help them on human rights and people were so mad at me. They said you can't help them on human rights said, okay, I give up because that became the issue. So I never did it. I never did any work for them. I wanted to help teach them about human rights because they had a lot of employees in California. So I gave that up. But I left Mercury to go with Actum. Two of the founders, one of them is Fabian Nunez who was the [Assembly] Speaker of California. I love my work. I'm doing healthcare stuff. I'm loving it. Helping people who have inventions, helping people who do translation services on healthcare. Helping with people who want to figure out a way to make it easier to pay for out of pocket costs. I'm loving it. And I feel in a funny way, because it's so hard to get things done in the Senate, working and I'm working with bipartisan teams on these issues. It's been interesting.

CM: There's so many questions to ask you Senator, but I just wanted to get sort of some general thoughts from you about politics and the future of politics, especially considering where we are right now. I do want to know what do you think are your greatest accomplishments? I'm going to get to that now.

BB: Oh my greatest accomplishments...

CM: I mean, looking back on it now. And also, I mean, what can you tell us about politics now that you're out of the game, in that respect, that immediate boxing match? What can you say about politics and where it's going here in the country?

BB: We'll start with that. We're at a perilous moment. And I really don't say that often. And I'm also a very optimistic person, so I'm optimistic we'll get through it. January 6th I get the chills when I say those words, and I watched like an out of body experience, these violent criminals, White supremacists, go into the Senate chamber that was a holy place for me in a lot of ways. A lot of bad things happened in that chamber, a lot of great things happened in that chamber. And people putting feces on the walls of the Capitol, that was a moment where I wasn't sure we'd survive it, but we did survive it. And we don't have time to go into all the reasons, but

people stepped up on both sides to save the day. So we got through it by the skin of our teeth.

And now where are we? And really, it gets back to what Lincoln said. Public sentiment is everything. That's all that matters. People have to see things clearly. And when I came up, I used to say, don't vote your party, vote the person. And I said that for good reason. We had people in the Republican party I loved, and one of them was State Senator Peter Behr, B-E-H-R. He taught me all about the environment. He was the most wonderful person. He was great. And I voted for him. Now I would never say it. Don't vote for Republican because right now, if you stay as a Republican, you're staying in a party that is going after the democracy, full throttle and afraid to stand up to Donald Trump who has unleashed these forces of evil, evil, evil on the country. We are at a moment. And so, I think the next few years, I am going to be working to make sure that this democracy survives. It is true. You said you're out of the game. I am out of the game myself, but I'm very much involved helping other people right now involving...

CM: In Congress, right.

BB: Congressional. Yeah.

CM: In your district.

BB: Right, in my district where I live now, where I vote now. I have a place in Oakland, but we vote down in Southern California. We have been given a chance to do something and Ken Calvert is...

CM: He is a Republican, right?

BB: He's a Republican and he is very far right. He voted with Trump constantly, a 100% voting record with Trump and against the right to choose. He couldn't even get himself to vote for the bipartisan infrastructure bill. I mean, he just walks down that right wing flight against a guy who's terrific. He's a former prosecutor, young man who's just, he's terrific on all those issues for me, so I'm involved. So here's the thing, the message to people is, you cannot sit on the sidelines anymore because this isn't just, "Oh, maybe that nice guy will win, or that nice lady." This is a different moment in time. Who are we? Who are we going to become? Are we going to save the democracy? So this is a real moment and I'm in a way, not being in the middle of it, it gives me a little more credibility because people are, "Oh, she's not running, and so she's going to say how she feels." So I'm still out there, still doing public speeches and doing things to get the word out and so... So as a matter of fact, this very day when I go home I'm doing a virtual appearance for Congressman Mike Levin, who's in a race down in the San Diego region.

So I'm still out there, but it's not about me. I'll be out there, as I said, as long as I have a breath and a brain, but it's about everybody. No one has the luxury. How many years we told younger women, "Your right to choose is hanging by a thread." They went, "Oh, okay, see you later." Nobody believed this could happen, you know? This is like Handmaiden's Tale. But when I go back to the accomplishments and the things that I'm most proud of, there are too many to talk

about. So if people are just, they should get my book, "The Art of Tough." I have my 50 top ones. But the ones that rise to my lips today talking to you is, saving a million acres of California wilderness, a million acres that will... The way they were by God, they're going to stay there forever. And the interesting story behind that is I wanted two million acres and I had it, but I knew I couldn't. So the question in politics is, do you hold out for the perfect or do you take the good? I took the good, a lot of environmentalists said, "You shouldn't wait." I wouldn't have gotten anything. So I got it. I got a million acres. So that's all throughout the state, which I'm very excited about.

I got the first funding under Bill Clinton for after school care. Federal funding never existed. It still does to this day. We eventually got a law passed that I wrote, and I did it with a Republican colleague who had a tough childhood. We have a billion dollars a year forever going to help after school, so I love that. We set drinking water standards to protect children, very important. I was able to get a bill that every year there's an appropriation of money to treat burn victims in the military, and of course that helps all burn victims because those injuries are just horrifying. I had a bill that passed that said, if a woman is raped or sexually violated in the military, you can't ask her why was she wearing a short dress, or how many times did she have sex before. What we did was we made the civil law match with the military law. Military law was behind on that, and I did that with a Republican colleague. And during the war, I read stories that, you can't believe this, military members who were injured in war and they went to a hospital, they were charged for their meals in the hospital. No, that's not right.

So it could go... I could sit here forever and talk to you about the different things that I've done. Highway bills. Every time that the Highway Bill expired, people said, "Oh my God, we can't do it in..." "We got them done across the aisle. I started the fight on climate, I didn't succeed, but I laid the groundwork. And just the other day when the bill passed, that has so much in it for climate, I got a call from a senator, Brian Schatz, who is about the age of my kids, and he called me up and he said, "Barbara, I just called to say thank you for laying the groundwork." My heart was so full because, first of all, it's so kind of him to do that, but... you know, it takes a long time to get things done. The Clean Air Act Amendments, it took years and years and years. So I could go on and on, and I'm not going to. But I would say... And I'll end with how I approach my work. There's only one thing I cared about my whole time in office starting from when I was a supervisor, which we didn't get to talk about too much. It was, "How do I make life better for the people I represent?" And it wasn't ideological. It wasn't in any way anything deeper than that. How do I make life better? And people always say, "What do you want on your tombstone?" Well, first of all, I probably won't have a tombstone, but if I had a tombstone, it would say "She tried to make life better for people." And that's how I feel.

CM: Do you have any regrets, anything you would have done differently?

BB: My biggest regret that I really had was that I couldn't end that war in Iraq. I tried, but I didn't. I feel maybe if I had organized more people...it just went on and on and on, even after people wanted it to end. And I don't know if I... I mean, one person couldn't, but I often wonder maybe if I had organized more in the Senate, in the House... That eats away at me. But I think,

looking back on it, I've made a couple of mistakes. I voted against Ben Bernanke. He was terrific. I regret that. I said that publicly. I'm sure I've said stupid things. Not the ones we've discussed. I wouldn't take back one of the ones we've discussed, but I'm sure I've said stupid things and misspoken a few times. But you know what, I'm a human being, I'm going to make mistakes. And the main thing is, you pick yourself up, and in public life, you have to develop a certain relationship with the people you serve. And I've been able to do it. I don't know how. I don't know why. But in every race I was supposed to lose, I won. Something was going on, maybe I had that connection, and people trusted me. And maybe they knew I was in it for the right reasons.

CM: Yeah. Last question, after all these years and all those votes, what keeps Barbara Boxer so impassioned about politics?

BB: I don't know, I don't know. I mean, most people could... Would pull their cover over their head and say, "I've done it." I just... As I said, I guess it's because of my parents. We'll go back to where we started. My father, as I said, went to school at night. He... One day I complained about my taxes to my father. I was working... I think I was getting 75 cents an hour. That's how old I am, doing filing or something. And I said, "Daddy, why am I paying \$2 of it?" And he said, he looked at me like this. He said, it makes me cry, "When you pay your taxes to this country for what they do for you, you get down on your knees and you kiss the ground." And of course, I was taken aback, "Daddy!" And so, years later, while I was on the campaign trail, I told that story, people got so mad and the headline the next day was, "Barbara Boxer says, "When you pay your taxes kiss the ground."

I think I lost a ton of votes, but the love of this country is embedded in me, and it could go the wrong way. But it could go the right way. So you don't stop, you can't. You don't have the luxury to stop. You asked if I would write another book. Another book I toyed with was, 'Why You Shouldn't Ever Stop', because it does keep you young and vibrant, and keeps you up-to-date. I have a friend who always says, all he ever watches on TV is Guys and Dolls, because he doesn't understand all of these... And I always look at him and say, "No, no, no, no, you've gotta get with it." But it does keep you vibrant and people shouldn't fade away.

CM: Senator Boxer, no chance of that happening. It's an honor. It's been an honor to talk to you today.

BB: Thanks Carla.

CM: Thank you so much for taking the time. I'm Carla Marinucci, we've been here for our Capitol Weekly, and this was a program founded by the California State Library, thank you all for joining us.

