

BOOK REVIEWS

Renegade For Peace And Justice: Congresswoman Barbara Lee Speaks For Me by, Barbara Lee (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2008), 223 pp., \$24.95

After the destruction of the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, all of the members of Congress authorized a blank check for President George Bush, who then launched his War on Terror and latest justification for American imperialism, except one dynamic, passionately brilliant, and incredible African American woman—Barbara Lee, a Democratic Representative from Oakland. As a result, Lee became a household name, but unbeknownst to the nation, she had long been a *Renegade for Peace & Justice*, the title of her revealing and exquisite memoir. In her autobiography, she discusses her upbringing in Texas and California, her tenure at Oakland's Mills College, her spiritual guidance from Christianity, her role models such as Rosa Parks and Betty Shabazz, her work as a Congresswoman as well the experiences that crafted her for that position from working in the Black Student Union and the Black Panther Party in college to working for Representatives Shirley Chisholm and Ron Dellums. Yet, the major contribution, and most and moving feature of Lee's autobiography is her accounts of her trials as a young African American woman.

As Lee writes, "The public saw a young idealistic woman with a big Afro involved in many community activities. But when the doors were closed, it was hell" (p. 147). The hell, a conceit of her early life, emanates from the racism surrounding her birth, growing up with her father, suffering through a miscarriage, marriage and divorce as a teenager, having an abortion, birthing two kids before the age of 20, living on public assistance, and enduring a physically abusive relationship. Her mother's relatives spent hours trying to compel racist officials at a Texas hospital to deliver Lee in 1946. They finally agreed, but during the delivery, the callous doctors caused a tear in Lee's left eye. "When I think about how and why [her scar] got there and about the disgraceful way my mother was treated," she writes, "it just reaffirms my resolve to make things better for women and people of color" (p. 3). Later, she notes concerning her abortion that "the anguish, guilt, and sorrow that I felt...is painful to think about even today" (p. 108). She also explains how she ended her first marriage "with a decent man who was not an abuser" and jumped in a second marriage with a man whose "rage was beyond control" and physically abused her because she was "unfamiliar with good men who didn't hit women" and "conditioned to expect abusive behavior" (p. 137). She eventually left him, but continued to look over her shoulder for him twenty years later.

Each story on its own with her analysis of her life's experiences is powerful. But in addition, she scrutinized the issues of single family homes,

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teenage marriage and pregnancy, abortion, welfare, and domestic abuse, yielding a memoir overflowing with relational wisdom and the sometimes brutal reality of African American womanhood. After learning how she pushed through trial after trial, it is not difficult to understand how Lee had the strength—a singular, extraordinary strength—to stand erect through the storm of social discontent and terrorist and fear-laden rhetoric after 9/11 to see past it and demonstrably say no to the Washington consensus. As she ended her chapter on it, “I am proud I used my moral compass and my ear for the voices of my constituents and people throughout the world to be a lone voice for reason at one of the nation’s most trying times. This has been the most humbling moment of my life” (p. 186).

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