

What Barbara Jordan Is Thinking

An Interview With Barbara Jordan by Liz Carpenter

February 5, 1985

MS. Magazine inaugurates with this issue a new series called, "What Are You Thinking?" It is interviewing a variety of women whose names are news and whose impact is great. We begin with Barbara Jordan, Texas state senator from 1966-1972, congresswoman from Houston from 1972-1978. In Congress she made a national impact with her incisive questioning during the Watergate hearings. She came home to Texas to Austin, the University of Texas, in 1979 as a full professor, teaching political values and ethics at the LBJ School of Public Affairs. She now holds the LBJ Centennial Chair in National Policy and has added a second course on policy development.

LIZ: *MS. Magazine* wants to know what you are thinking about these days, Barbara.

BARBARA: There are a lot of things to think about and sometimes you can't really figure out how to get a handle on so many of the complexities that are surrounding us. We hear a lot about limits, about budgetary limits in the main, and so I spend some time thinking about how can we, as a people, afford to do the things which would make us comfortable. And I think about the American spirit which is so expansive and which takes in the realities of everybody. We don't want people to suffer, we don't want them to hurt, we don't want them to be sick, we don't want them to be ignorant, and yet if we try to be universal in our gifts we then run against limited resources. I've been just wondering how could we remain true to the American spirit we have for people in the face of what we are talking about in terms of budgetary limits.

Then I think about survival, survival of the universe, survival of civilization, survival of the continent. That comes into focus because we hear about the euphoria over the

Jordan -- Special Interview -- 2

anticipated nuclear arms control talks in Geneva. Then you wonder how are those mortal men going to come to grips with this issue which has pushed us to the precipice of annihilation, and you think, well, because people infinitely have good judgment. I believe that. I'm the optimist in terms of the judgment of people. We'll pull back--our common sense will pull us back is what I say. And that probably is too simplistic a response, but, that's what I say.

LIZ: Well, I like what you said about limits, because the American spirit is--there are no limits, if we work hard and if we are generous of heart, that we can invest in human beings and lift them out of their poverty. It's a much less cynical thing to do than to just pay them off with welfare. To believe in a War on Poverty program, for instance--

BARBARA: Yes.

LIZ: --as President Johnson did. How you reconcile those challenges at this time when we have a political party that was re-elected by a large margin with kind of a hair shirt about social issues. How would you vote if you were in Congress today on cuts on social issues?

BARBARA: I would hope that I could vote on a plane higher than politics. Now, that is asking almost the impossible for a politician to vote on a plane above politics. My problem is that it's politics which keeps us reluctant to do the things we could boldly do. It is politics which keeps us from making recommendations which we feel will not be marketable in the public. If no one was going to be re-elected to Congress, I think we could have one whale of a program that would be in the interest of people--in the public interest. So, if I were in Congress today I would probably engage in the kinds of marginal adjustment, which is so often the case, and I would look at the President's program and I would know that that did not comport with my idea of what we ought to be doing, but I also know that we can't reach economic productivity by slashing defense programs and that sort of thing, so I would fall into the mode of marginal incremental

Jordan -- Special Interview -- 3

adjustment. That's probably what I would do.

LIZ: Is that one of the reasons that you made a surprising exit from Congress which was so disappointing to a lot of us when it seemed you had the world out there--the speakership, the vice presidency, the presidency, perhaps, that you did have to make those adjustments in order to second-guess the electorate?

BARBARA: I can't say that that was the primary reason I left the Congress. I did know that in Congress one chips away, one does not make shots, one does not make bold strokes. After six years I had wearied of the little chips that I could put on a woodpile.

LIZ: If you had all your "druthers," where would you choose to make the bold strokes from?

BARBARA: The presidency. That is the office, that is the place. You can have the moral leadership of the country and, if your instincts are good, if you are a good person, it is from that office that you make dramatic moves and change things. We have seen that historically, as you well know.

LIZ: Yes, the difference in presidential leadership ranges from the people who were uninspired and those who did inspire and rally. And of course, one of your strengths is rallying. Do you think appointive or elective office are in your future?

BARBARA: I, Liz, really no longer have any interest in appointive or elective office. I served twelve years in elective office: six years in the Texas state senate and six years in the Congress, and I did what I could do from those positions. And now that I am teaching students, I think my future is in seeing to it that the next generation is ready to take over.

LIZ: That is your podium now, teaching ethics in government here at the University of Texas.

Jordan -- Special Interview -- 4

BARBARA: Right.

LIZ: And you expect to be doing that the rest of your life?

BARBARA: That's what I expect to be doing. Now I can't say for the rest of my life, because there may be other careers. This is my third career, and so there may be others, but for the time being, this is what I am enjoying doing.

LIZ: Was ethics in government your choice of a course to teach?

BARBARA: Ethics in government was not my choice. I didn't have a choice of any particular subject matter, but when asked by Elspeth Rostow, who at the time I came to the school was Dean of the LBJ School, when I was asked to join the faculty of the LBJ School, I was asked to teach two courses: Intergovernmental Relations and an ethics course. I then structured this course called Political Values and Ethics which I have taught each semester that I have been at the School, and it is very popular with the students. There has been a waiting list for the course ever since I have been teaching it.

LIZ: I know, and your popularity rating on the campus of this university is fantastic. The top. Did you bring lessons from the Congress? Are there incidents in your Congressional service when you saw the unethical happen that made you wish even more to be a teacher of what you consider true values and ethics in government?

BARBARA: Liz, I was there during Watergate. I was there during the effort to impeach Richard Nixon, and if there was any single experience I had in the Congress which made me know that public servants needed a very high and keen ethical sensitivity, my experiences in Watergate certainly underscored that for me.

LIZ: You must have had to do an awful lot of homework and study in order to ask the kind of questions that you did.

Jordan -- Special Interview -- 5

BARBARA: I not only did a lot of homework and study, I lived the impeachment matter while I was engaged in it. It was a 24-hour-a-day engagement where I was concerned, because I had to get the facts straight for me so that I could act properly on behalf of the people I represented.

LIZ: Did you or any members of the committee have the experience of efforts to influence you--to be soft on the situation? Were overtures made in that direction?

BARBARA: Overtures were made by Republican members of the House Judiciary Committee and Republican members of the Congress. There was a constant effort on their part to present President Nixon in the best possible light. And it was necessary to cut through their politics and resist their personal overtures, no matter how close you may have become to one of the colleagues on the other side of the aisle. You knew that you could not be overwhelmed by a sense of personal affection or affinity, but that you had a job to do and you had to look beyond personality and get to the public interest, because that's what we had to serve.

LIZ: Were you shocked at the lengths that a "lobby," whether within the Congress or out, go to to influence your vote? Did they reach into your district with threats?

BARBARA: Not into my district, Liz, because my district was sort of an island. I created that district when I was in the Texas senate and it was a district that I knew very well. The people in that district were people I grew up with. They knew me when I was going to Sunday School, and not representing anybody doing anything, so I did not have to resist overtures within my district. On the other hand, Liz, people who make overtures and threats politically rarely engage in that kind of activity in a blatant way. It is usually very, very subtle and surreptitious, and therefore you would not see blatant displays of unethical and illegal behavior on the part of lobbyists or others.

LIZ: But they get as close to home and as close to the bone as possible, and while it

Jordan -- Special Interview -- 6

might not have been your district, I would suspect that if they were after your vote on anything they would call on some people in Texas to make phone calls.

BARBARA: That is correct. I do not consider that "per se" unethical behavior. If you are trying to get Barbara Jordan's vote on a given issue, and you know a person within your district--a friend of yours--who might have influence with her, and ask this person to call and ask if she would give consideration to a given matter, that happened to me often--many times--and I would listen. Because if people who you respect call and suggest things to you about a given issue, you are going to pay attention. So that's, I think, a legitimate way to get the attention of a representative or a legislator.

LIZ: But is it likely to make one a cynic? And how do you fight cynicism within yourself, when you are a purist?

BARBARA: Well, I am in a real sense, Liz, but you've got to remember that I am also a born optimist. I will see optimism where few people can see it. Now, I don't mean the silly kind of optimism that I think was demonstrated by some of the patriotic fervor we heard during the '84 campaign. But I believe that if you can attend to the humanity, the inner reality of individuals, that each human being has a value as a person, and I try to address that valuable person who is there within the skin of the individual, and I find that if you can just cut off the layers, the rhetoric, the superficiality, and get to the inner core--the heart, the valuable core of an individual--that you will find a responsive and responsible human being, and that is destructive of cynicism. It absolutely is.

LIZ: It also takes the patience of Job.

BARBARA: It does. You must be very, very patient.

LIZ: Do you have a lot of concerns about our education today as we try to hang on to

Jordan -- Special Interview -- 7

the humanities, when we know the robots are coming, the computer age is here. How do you marry poetry and computers?

BARBARA: Oh, I do have that concern. Yes, I am concerned about the state of education. We can go overboard with the robotics, and I don't want that to happen because too much is lost when that occurs.

Liz: Do you feel from being in politics and watching politics, that women are more expendable when the going gets rough?

BARBARA: Politics is not easy for a woman. And that is period--no semicolon. Why is that the case? When you talked about raising money, I think about how much money it now takes to win elective office, and in many instances, it borders on obscenity, the amounts of money which are necessary. When I ran my first race for the state legislature, we just had to raise \$12,000, \$15,000, \$20,000. That was hard to come by for me, a person without independent resources, and then when I ran for Congress my first race we spent \$75,000. Well, I thought that was just a monumental sum of money, but I could not for the life of me get out there and say to the men who had the money and they, mostly, men controlled the money--I couldn't go out there and say, "Look, would you please give some money to help me run in this office?" What I did was to get men who were friends of mine to go to the men with money and say, "Will you give some money for this candidate?" I don't know when that will change. I don't know when we can, as women, have enough independent resources that we can move out there and really fund our own causes. It is tough on the money side. It is also tough because there remains, no matter whether one is willing to admit it or not, a feeling that women are not quite up to the job. Now, I know that that sounds like we are talking about another age. We can't be talking about 1985. No, I'm talking about 1985. There is a sense still that a woman is not quite up to the job. There is a

Jordan -- Special Interview -- 8

general feeling that men will bring a toughness to an issue which a woman will not bring. That is perception, that is not reality. We'll get over that. It will take a while, but it is coming.

LIZ: Meanwhile, the whole effort of trying to get women to take those risks and to run the uphill battle for office, is difficult, and I, as a Texas woman, really want to thank you for talking to groups like the Texas Women's Leadership, and others to encourage women to run. I believe we have quite a strong breed of women down here in Texas.

BARBARA: I wish I could say that equality and justice are twin realities of life in the United States, but I cannot say that at this time. All I can say is that equality and justice remain in our ethical and idealistic view of what the United States of America ought to be, and I believe that on both those issues--equality and justice--things are happening quickly, and I do think that I will live long enough to say in reality, equality is real and not illusory, and that justice is fact and not fiction.

LIZ: Do you think things like the Rainbow Coalition, the candidacy of Jesse Jackson, served a good purpose?

BARBARA: Yes and no. Jesse Jackson and the Rainbow Coalition provided a focus for black people to rally toward which would not have been possible without that. Now, I believe that there will be a black person one day who will run for President of the United States and be elected. I don't know that I will see it in my lifetime, but I believe it will happen. The problem with Jesse Jackson's candidacy is that Jesse had a very aggressive candidacy, as he should have had, but it was couched in terms which frightened people. And people don't like to be frightened. Jesse, unfortunately, had the result of frightening white people away from the Democratic Party--that is one of the things which happened, I think, in 1984.

LIZ: Do you feel that human rights, which got a big boost in the '60s and '70s, is less

Jordan -- Special Interview -- 9

of a national priority today on the national scene?

BARBARA: Given the present occupant of the White House and the administration which surrounds that occupant, it would appear that human rights is less of a priority than it was during, say, the presidency of Jimmy Carter, and that's regrettable.

LIZ: When you think about applying ethics in a democracy, in our government, to human rights, and particularly to women's rights, what do you feel about the Equal Rights Amendment, and what do you think about abortion?

BARBARA: The Equal Rights Amendment is right, and it ought to be a part of the Constitution, and it is not a part of the Constitution because so many untruths were said about the effect of the ERA, that many people believed those things which were not true, and consequently it is not a part of the Constitution. But it should be.

LIZ: And do you think it will be?

BARBARA: Ultimately, yes, I think it will be. Abortion is another matter, Liz. Abortion has developed into an issue which is surrounded by conflict and difficulty, and it should not be. I think that we will get pulled out of the conflictual nature of the abortion issue once we get a rational and reasonable discussion underway between those who say we are pro-choice and those who say we are pro-life. They are both pro-life, as far as I am concerned, and until we can really get through it and become serious and listen to the arguments which are being developed on both sides, will we reach some compromise. We have compromised just about every other issue in this country that you can think of, and there will be some resolution and compromise on abortion.

LIZ: Of course, abortion and the ERA have nothing to do with each other except that the more abrasive issue spills over into it. Those are the untruths you were talking about. But,

Jordan -- Special Interview -- 10

on the subject of abortion, are there some basic human rights of a woman to the privacy of her own body, the determination of her own body?

BARBARA: Well, Liz, I think you can anticipate my response to that question. Of course, each woman has the right to her own body and making decisions which would affect what her body undergoes. That's a matter which should not even be a subject of dispute. It should be understood for each individual. I control my body. It is my body and I make the decisions about what's done with it and what I do with it. And I think that that is just basic and fundamental, and is unarguable.

LIZ: Looking to the present Congressional agenda, what do you expect the long-range effect will be on the drastic cuts from the social services that have been proposed by the Reagan Administration? If they go through, what effect does that have on civilized society or the progress of the United States?

BARBARA: Well, I am very grateful for checks and balances and separation of powers whenever I hear things like the Reagan budget, and I feel that the Congress of the United States--House and Senate--will bring the Reagan budget back to a realistic posture so that we do not have to have things limited which ought not be limited. I believe there remains a firm sense in this country of people who want to do some of the things which the Reagan budget would cut. For instance, the Small Business Administration, that is up for being killed. There are people who are just not going to stand for that to happen. The Job Corps is up to be killed, and there are people in the Congress who are not going to stand for that to happen. There will be some adjustment, I feel, in farm subsidies, and not the drastic changes which are proposed by this administration. As I look ahead to when the battle is over, the Congress will have changed the Reagan program in such a way that it will make sense.

Jordan -- Special Interview -- 11

LIZ: Is there a major difference between the two parties? For instance, do Republicans fear the word "government" so much that they want as little as possible, and do the Democrats enjoy the art of government so much that they use it to better advantage, or perhaps overdo it? In a democracy, what is the right balance between overgoverning and undergoverning?

BARBARA: In a democracy, Liz, the government is there to perform certain purposes. There are things we have government do which government should not be doing. But there are things which are done by government which only government can do. As Democrats, we have trusted government to do those things which by law and by the Constitution only it can do. And those things certainly are in the area of national defense and personal security, peace and security, for the nation. Where the Democrats, perhaps, went a little overboard, is in thinking that government could do everything. And what we have to do now, as Democrats, is not fall into the mode that government can do nothing. We don't want that kind of a posture. But the ring of the Republican party is that we have government involved in too many things. We are the government. We talk about the government as if it is some alien "other," but government is not an alien "other." Government is us. We know that there are things which this government must do. The Democrats are more willing to trust government to do the things which government traditionally, historically, legally, constitutionally, ought to be doing, than the Republican party. And that is a fundamental difference between the two parties.

LIZ: You and I both grew up in the Bible belt, and we both spent a lot of time in Sunday School and in church. The heavy emphasis on missiles--heavy defense spending--and even the wild-changing weather patterns that we've been through this winter, give rise to fears that our planet may not survive, that it might be doomed. Is there a future for it? Can human

Jordan -- Special Interview -- 12

kind survive? Is there a role for humanity in the infinite scheme of things?

BARBARA: The interesting thing that we may note is that the public appears to be changing its mind about spending everything that it can for more, bigger, better missiles and weapons of destruction. There will always be a role for humanity, because there is nothing which has been invented which can replace the human mind. Now I know artificial intelligence is on the board. We are into that wave of computers. But there is still the uniqueness of vision which no artificial artifice can change. I think the role for human kind is here and it is fixed and it is certain, and there will always be sensible people to bring us around to the proper vision that we ought to have about the future.

LIZ: The planet Earth is here to stay.

BARBARA: I believe that.

LIZ: In your own personal code of religion, what do you believe about a hereafter?

BARBARA: I believe, Liz, that I have a spirit that is not going to disappear. That my body will die and disintegrate, but there is that basic law of physics, that matter is neither created nor destroyed. Now the skin and bones will go back to dust, but the spirit of that individual, the presence or is-ness of me, I feel, will live. And in my view of religion, that it is that spirit of Barbara Jordan which will continue to live. In what state, in what sense, I don't know, I haven't died yet. But I do believe that those of us who have lived well and tried to do things in a Christian and thoughtful and loving way, I believe that there is a constructive role for that spirit which will remain after the flesh is gone.

(Liz Carpenter, who did a 35-year stint in Washington from FDR to Jimmy Carter, as news correspondent and later as government spokeswoman, lives in Austin, Texas, where she writes, consults, and raises hell when so inclined.)

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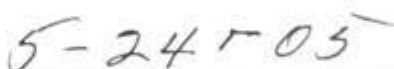
BARBARA JORDAN, recorded by Elizabeth Carpenter

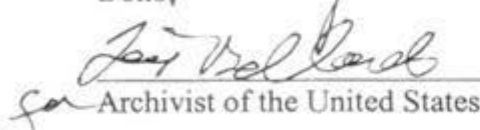
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