

I'm Going to Win if I Can

A Visit with Lindy Boggs

By Roger A. Stetter



The Boggs' family at the Capitol in 1950. Photo from the Boggs Family Archives. Used with permission.



In 1997, President Bill Clinton appointed Lindy Boggs as the U.S. ambassador to the Vatican, a position she held until 2001. Roger A. Stetter, left, attended Lindy's investiture. *Photo provided by Roger A. Stetter.*

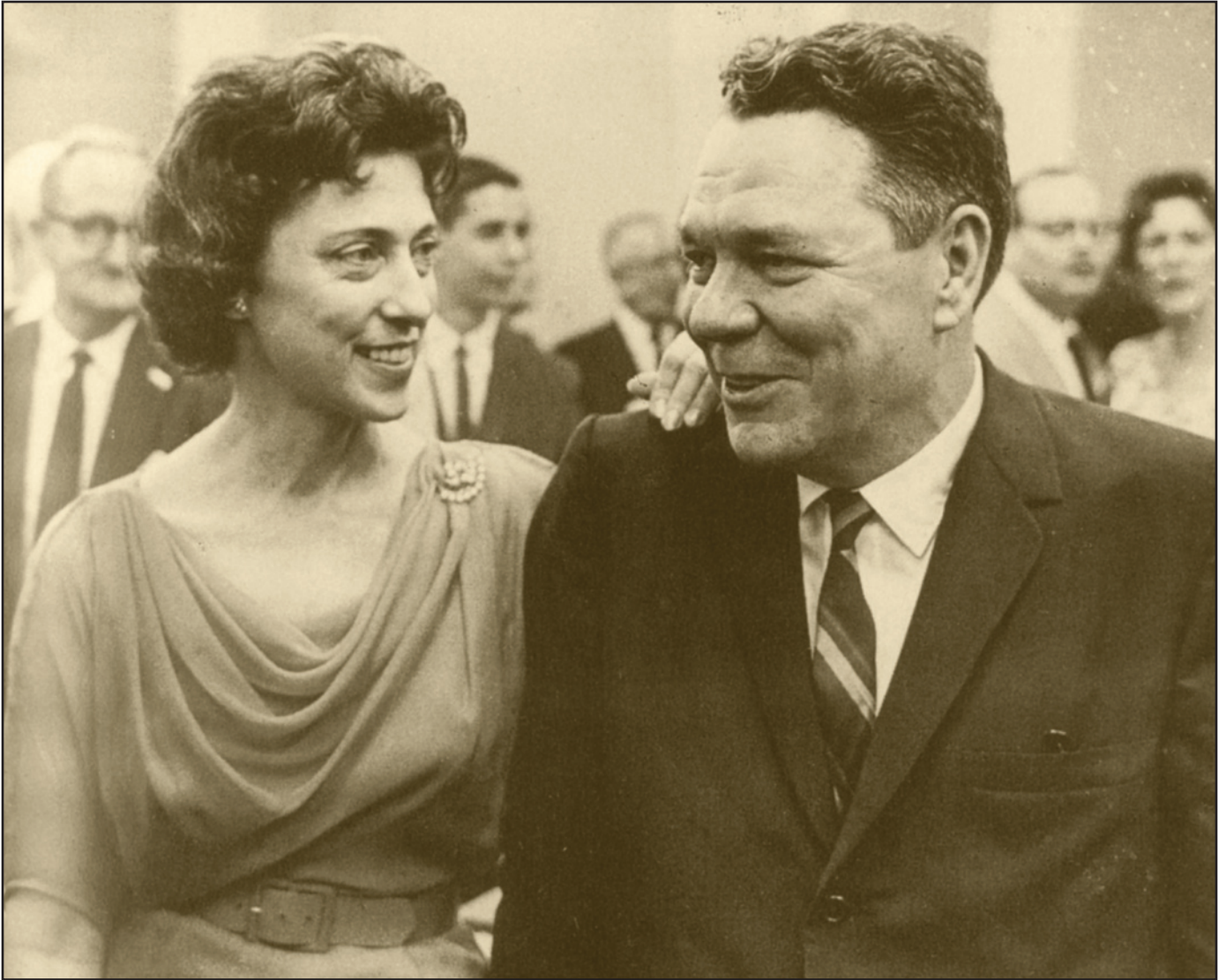
I never dreamed I would lead the life that I have led.

—Lindy Boggs, *Washington Through a Purple Veil: Memoirs of a Southern Woman* (1994)¹

Earlier this year, I visited with Lindy Claiborne Boggs, now 93, the first Congresswoman from Louisiana and the first woman to serve as U.S. Ambassador to the Vatican, at her new home in Chevy Chase, Md. Our visit coincided with the inauguration of President Barack Obama, furnishing the perfect backdrop to talk about her life of service to others and struggle for equal justice for all.

An Unusual Childhood

An only child whose father, a lawyer, died when she was 2 years old, Lindy grew up on a Pointe Coupee Parish cotton plantation owned by her stepfather. She rode horseback, fished and played boys' games. "I didn't expect to live on a plantation; I knew that way of life was on its way out. I recognize now that the women not only ran the households, they took care of their husbands and children and made their own entertainment, often working as hard on cultural activities as they did on keeping everything on their extensive premises running smoothly."²



Lindy and Hale Boggs in 1958. Photo from the Boggs Family Archives. Used with permission.

A precocious child, Lindy discovered the joys of reading in her stepfather “Daddy George’s” extensive library³ and was privately tutored at home until she was 9 years old, when she went off to St. Joseph’s Academy, the convent school in New Roads, where she graduated as valedictorian of her class. Not yet 16 years old, Lindy charmed the dean at Sophie Newcomb College at Tulane University in New Orleans to permit her to enter as a freshman after reciting Hamlet’s “To be, or not to be” soliloquy.

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The leadership skills nurtured in her childhood and at St. Joseph’s manifested

themselves quickly at Tulane, where Lindy served as the “women’s editor” on the college newspaper, the *Hullabaloo*, and met her future husband, Thomas Hale Boggs, who was the editor-in-chief.

Alighting from the bus en route to class one day, a male faculty member challenged Lindy to a foot-race. She hesitated at first, thinking to herself, “should I let him win?,” telling me “in those days boys were first.” Then Lindy decided, “I’m going to win if I can.”

The same competitive spirit and refusal to believe there were things that women couldn’t do as well as men led Lindy to fight the Long machine that kept many people off the voting rolls and enfranchised the dead, and to help launch Hale’s

political career in becoming the youngest elected member of Congress at age 26.

Mr. & Mrs. Boggs Go to Washington

Lindy arrived with her husband in Washington in 1941, just two years after Jimmy Stewart made his famous debut in the classic film, *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*.

She recalled meeting her heroine, Eleanor Roosevelt, a leader in civil and women’s rights, at a White House garden party given in honor of Supreme Court justices’ wives. Arriving late because her son, Tommy, cut his first tooth that day,

the 24-year-old Lindy hoped she might be forgiven for such a breach of protocol. Mrs. Roosevelt said, "Now come and meet these ladies." Taking Lindy through the receiving line, she remarked, "Can you believe that this child has a baby old enough to be cutting a tooth and she couldn't come until now? I'm glad someone has her priorities straight."

Lindy never forgot her priorities, raising three prominent children — Cokie Roberts, a television news commentator and author; Tommy Boggs, a prominent lobbyist and lawyer; and the late Barbara Boggs Sigmund, a mayor of Princeton, N.J. Yet, during the years that Hale was in Congress, Lindy also managed his Capitol Hill office, chaired various committees, such as both John F. Kennedy's and Lyndon B. Johnson's inaugural ball committees, held the distinction of becoming the first woman to chair the Democratic National Convention in 1976, acted as the unofficial hostess for the Democratic Party, presiding over parties and receptions attended by most of the Democrats in the nation's capital, and continued her community work in New Orleans.

Political Office

When Hale died in a plane crash in 1972, Lindy ran in a special election to fill his seat. She won, making her the first woman to represent Louisiana in Congress. Over the next 17 years in Congress, Lindy became a major voice for women's rights, helping to pass legislation that guarantees women's access to credit in their own names and prohibits gender discrimination in the granting of small-business loans. Serving on key House committees, including the Appropriations Committee and the Banking, Currency and Housing Committees, Lindy used her own special combination of Southern charm and persistence to achieve many other successes, including helping the Head Start program get off the ground and securing many important appropriations for her home district, including money for colleges, hospitals, housing projects, a \$10 million energy research center at the University of New Orleans, and numerous

navigational and hurricane protection projects.

At the time of her retirement from Congress in 1991, Lindy was the only white Congressperson in the United States representing a black-majority district. In 1991, Lindy attended the dedication of the Lindy Claiborne Boggs Room, a reading room for Congresswomen at the U.S. Capitol. In 2006, she was awarded the Congressional Distinguished Service Award for her time in the House of Representatives.⁴

In 1997, President Clinton appointed Lindy as the U.S. ambassador to the Vatican, a position she held until 2001. Lindy adored Pope John Paul II and worked tirelessly in this crucial diplomatic post.

At a recent film screening of the PBS documentary, "Lindy Boggs: Steel and Velvet," her granddaughter, Rebecca Roberts, recalled asking Lindy, "How do we address the Pope?" To which Lindy replied, "Well, I call him darlin'."

Once asked how she managed to accomplish so much in both her private and public life, Lindy replied, "I sleep fast."

My Lindy

Many people in public life have remarked on Lindy's unflinching grace, her keen intelligence, and her tenacity. But to me she is a very dear friend who always puts others first, never says a bad word about anyone, enjoys life to the fullest and is forever young, elegant and beautiful.

A woman whose most vivid memory of Cambodian refugee camps was holding a tiny six-month-old baby in the palms of her hands and singing French lullabies to stop her crying.⁵

A woman who adored living on Bourbon Street ("although it is not a suitable residential area in the opinion of some of my friends and relatives") in a 1795 three-story house next to a Creole garden where camellia, sweet olive, magnolia and Cape jasmine permeate the air with their perfume and a splashing fountain crowned with an angel casts a cooling spray. On a good day, she could

walk to Mass in seven minutes, passing Preservation Hall and Pat O'Brien's, the A&P grocery store, the Faulkner House bookshop in Pirate's Alley, and stop to talk with neighbors from all walks of life along the way.⁶

I often wonder at the boundless energy and eternal optimism of my remarkable friend. She sees the goodness in all of us, appeals to the better angels of our nature, and recognizes the fundamental truth that every person is indispensable.

FOOTNOTES

1. The inspiration for the title of Lindy's memoir is based on her experience in endeavoring to attend a hearing in the Capitol shortly after her husband, Hale, was sworn in as a freshman Congressman. Then just 24-years-old, Lindy, wearing a sweater and skirt, asked the clerk outside the hearing room, "May I go in please?" "Oh, sure, honey," he said, looking away in total disbelief. Lindy hurried to the veil and scarf counter of a local department store and had the salesman drape a purple veil on her hat. Returning to the hearing room, she told the same clerk who guarded the door, "I'm Mrs. Boggs. I'd like to be seated, please." "Oh, yes ma'am," he said, "Come right in," and led the way. Lindy Boggs, *Washington Through a Purple Veil: Memoirs of a Southern Woman* (hereinafter cited as "Memoirs"), at 2-3.

2. Memoirs at 23.

3. Her maternal aunt, Rowena Morrison, paid Lindy 25 cents for each book she read. ". . . I found a collection of Shakespeare's plays in my stepfather's library, each play in a separate little red leather book I could hold in one hand. I made money on Mr. Shakespeare and became a great lover of his work. . . ." Memoirs at 26-27.

4. Just as the tragedy of her husband's death had led Lindy to run for Congress, the illness of her eldest daughter, Barbara, was the reason for her retirement. She told other family members she must retire because "I can't hug Barbara from the Capitol."

5. Memoirs at 321-22.

6. Memoirs at 347-50.

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