



WHO PAYS THE PRICE?

BY JULIANNE MALVEAUX - Broadcast on Rough Cuts, NPR, January, 2007

On most days of the week, I adore Senator Barbara Boxer, enjoy her politics, and revel in her feistiness. The California Democrat holds it up for liberal values, and she does it in a way that makes you want to shout.

On most days, I groan at Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. We have little more in common than our race and our gender. To be sure, there are moments when I have been proud at her "representation". But those brief moments of pride have been totally eclipsed by what I perceive as her amoral embrace of our illogical actions in Iraq.

Having said all that, I would also say that I had Condi's back last week when she collided with Senator Boxer who suggested that Dr. Rice had no dog in the Iraq fight. Boxer said she paid no price for war because her children were too old, and her grandchildren too young. Then she said that because Rice had no immediate family, the single woman also paid no price. I shuddered when Boxer made that comment, as a single woman of about Rice's age who can be described as having "no immediate family".

Since when did having family become a requirement for making public policy decisions? Newly-elected Senator James Webb (D-Va) has a son who serves in Iraq, but no one else does. If he were to decide, we'd be leaving tomorrow. Is Barbara Boxer suggesting that only those who have a price to pay get a vote in this?

If we use marital status to make policy decisions, should those without children make decisions about education? Should only those legislators with children enrolled in public schools get to vote on No Child Left Behind? Should only those able to experience abortion vote on who gets to have one? Should only those with estates vote on the estate tax? A criterion that suggests that only those who pay a direct price on decisions gets to decide on them pushes us into interesting and uncivil silos that are more divisive than cooperative. Whatever happened to the notion of a nation? It bites the dust with the Boxer assertion that only those who have something to lose have a reason to vote.

Furthermore, though, I am surprised at Senator Boxer's ignorance of the realities that shape the lives of African American women. According to the Census, more than 40 percent of African American women are unmarried, compared to a number around half that for white women.

There are many reasons for this. Some Black women don't do duets because some don't want to. Others would marry, but they say the pickings are slim. African American male-female relationships, and issues of family formation, have been a subject of discussion among African Americans for at least two decades, as African American women's college attendance and labor force participation has exceeded that of African American men. Whether African American women are single by

choice or by default, they don't need a United States Senator to describe us as second-class citizens before the world.

Indeed, we single black women are a boon, not a burden, to our communities. We are the women who often offer a helping hand to the single mom who simply needs a place to drop off our children while she takes an hour or two for herself. We are the aunts, cousins and godmothers who invest our love and our energy in children we connect with whether they are "immediate family" or not. In the tradition of the African American extended family, we lend helping hands and happy thoughts, education, culture, and guidance, to those young people we care about. And we volunteer! We work in our churches, sororities, and community organizations, using our skills to offer fill the holes in a safety net that is now frayed.

Senator Boxer is absolutely right to question Dr. Rice on her judgment about Iraq. But she tarnishes her own record by suggesting that Dr. Rice may have chosen differently because she has "no immediate family." I think Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice is absolutely wrong about Iraq. But Dr. Rice is wrong, not because she is single with no immediate family, but because she bought into the Bush hype about "weapons of mass distraction". Surely Barbara Boxer could have made that point without criticizing Condi's single status. If she wanted to talk about Condi's love life, that's a topic for drinks with the girls, not a Senate hearing that should have focused on whether tens of thousands of young Americans – men women, married and single – will put their lives at risk over a failed policy.