

SHE BROKE THE LAW

By **Patricia King**

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For a host of personal and professional reasons, I believe that Zoe Baird should ask President-elect Clinton to withdraw her nomination to be attorney general of the United States. If she does not do so, I believe she should not be confirmed by the Senate.

I write as a former Justice Department official, a black citizen, the working parent of a young child in a two-career family and a Democrat who desperately wants the Clinton presidency to succeed.

To my mind, Baird's hiring of illegal aliens and her failure to pay Social Security taxes for them absolutely disqualify her from serving as the nation's top law-enforcement officer.

The iron demand that our nation respect the Constitution and the laws of the United States has helped to transform me from a baby born into segregation into a citizen, able to create a strong career and to make a contribution to our country. But the work of achieving justice for all Americans is not over, and an attorney general who broke the law for her own convenience will be at a great disadvantage in carrying forward that important task.

Having worked in the Department of Justice, I know how important the aura that emanates from that fifth-floor office at the corner of 10th and Constitution is to the work carried out in every nook and cranny in that place. That department has suffered a series of tainted and tawdry attorneys general, and it cannot fulfill its role in the president-elect's vision led by another tainted leader, no matter how intelligent, accomplished and well-recommended she may be.

Not only does the attorney general supervise the criminal, civil rights, anti-trust and tax divisions, she also has to oversee such law-enforcement agencies as the FBI, the Bureau of Prisons, the Drug Enforcement Administration and the Immigration and Naturalization Service, to which she has just been required to pay a fine. Once a backwater of the department, the INS has grown enormously in importance. The movement of poor populations toward rich economies has become a huge issue around the globe. The imagination races with visions of Attorney General Baird's discussions on immigration policy with top career officials in INS, and it goes through the roof when it pictures her with some of the tough customers in the Border Patrol.

One wonders how those officials and others in the department will feel taking instructions from someone who was a good enough lawyer to be paid more than half a million dollars a year for her services, but broke the law because she claims she received bad legal advice. When I have legal problems, I can avail myself of the wide range of legal wisdom to be found along the corridors at the Georgetown University Law Center. Friends there go to great trouble and expense to obey the law that Baird and her husband broke. It is hard to imagine that the Yale Law faculty is both less knowledgeable and less law abiding than that at Georgetown.

And though I don't make nearly as much money as Baird, I do not break the law with either my husband's and my child-care provider or the woman who comes to clean once a week, though God knows, obeying the law requires an immense amount of bookkeeping. The fact that some people do flout this law does not justify Baird's behavior. If the law is silly or inconvenient, able people like the Baird-Gewirtz family should work to change it. But hundreds of thousands of couples in situations similar to Baird's do take the trouble to obey the law. Her confirmation as attorney general would be

an insult to all of us. Moreover, descended from people who once did domestic work, I know that payment of Social Security taxes is essential for people with that kind of meager income to ward off destitution in old age.

I live in the inner city. I see poor black youngsters every day, and though the odds are stacked against them, I want them to travel the tough road of hard studying and hard work to respectable citizenship rather than the criminal road to fast and easy money. I thought that President-elect Clinton wanted that from them too since he preached endlessly during the campaign about the need for inner-city responsibility. And during the campaign, people like me argued back that we were prepared to do what we could to inculcate great responsibility into the hardest-pressed places in our community, but that there had to be responsibility in the big offices and the executive suites of this nation as well. What, pray tell, are we to say to an inner-city teenager if we have a law-breaking attorney general?

I have been proud to be a part of the work of the Justice Department. In recent years, as the top office there has been occupied by Edwin Meese and others whose regard for law and truth demeaned the great honor they had been given, it became hard for me to look at the building and remember how I used to feel. I thought President-elect Clinton was about to set that right. With Zoe Baird, he cannot do it.