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Won't back down

Nancy Pelosi isn't going down without a fight. Though she and her fellow Democrats were wounded by Hillary Clinton's defeat in the 2016 presidential election, as the most senior female politician in the party Pelosi is determined to help lead the opposition against Donald Trump. Between the president's attack on healthcare, his antagonistic rhetoric and ongoing revelations about possible collusion with Russia, there is plenty to oppose. Not that Pelosi's ever been one to back down from a challenge.

Indeed, the House of Representatives minority leader has been in the game long enough to know the rules of engagement. Meeting in her office in the south wing of the vast neoclassic Capitol building, the septuagenarian, dressed in a teal trouser suit, exudes the sort of presence

Before the 2016 US election, Nancy Pelosi was preparing for a different life. But the Democrats' loss has reignited her fire.

By *Ed Stocker*
Photography *Jared Soares*

that only people who have spent years in the spotlight seem to possess. And she's clearly most comfortable in attack mode.

A Congress veteran with 30 years under her belt, Pelosi is a West Coast liberal who has made a name for herself as a uniter and enforcer in the ranks. Championed on the left for her progressive politics, particularly her support of same-sex marriage, and reviled on the right as the destroyer of so-called traditional American values, she has one clear endgame right now: leading the Democrats to victory at the midterm elections in 2018 and taking back at least one of the federal chambers.

Hailing from an Italian-American family, Pelosi was born and raised in Baltimore, Maryland, where both her father and brother served as mayor. She

moved to San Francisco, the hometown of her husband Paul, at the end of the 1960s and began hosting Democratic party events. Being a progressive Democrat in a bastion of openness and tolerance has guaranteed her a safe seat since her initial 1987 victory. It’s meant that she has been able to wield significant fundraising clout for other campaigns – she helped raise \$141m (€121m) in the 2016 election cycle alone – and focus on leadership. Not that she’s ever abandoned the people of her district. Today she wears a watch with a rainbow-coloured strap, a testament to her involvement in sexuality rights both on the West Coast and nationally.

Pelosi also proved herself an effective opposition leader when she was sworn in as speaker of the House in January 2007 during the George W Bush administration and after the Democrats had regained control of the House. It was the first and only time a woman has presided over the US’s lower house and Pelosi developed a reputation for her outspoken stands against Bush. For Cindy Simon Rosenthal, co-author of the book *Speaker Pelosi and the New American Politics*, she proved “very smart, very strategic and very successful at persuading people to support her”. (Pelosi held on to the position until 2010’s midterms when the Obama administration ceded the House back to the Republicans – part of the tug-of-war nature of Washington power.)

It was her role as speaker that thrust her into the national spotlight as a Democratic heavyweight – and it was her hallmark toughness that proved crucial in steering the momentous Affordable Care Act, also known as Obamacare, through the House in 2010. “She was the aggressive voice on Capitol Hill, pushing [Obama] to move forward when he was timid politically,” says Julian E Zelizer, a professor of history and public affairs at Princeton University. Indeed, when Obama was contemplating a smaller and more digestible bill, Pelosi persuaded him to introduce all of the legislation at once – and it worked.

Pelosi, nevertheless, has her detractors and they’ve been increasingly vocal. In June’s special election in Georgia to fill a House seat, Republicans attacked

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(1) Nancy Pelosi’s office on Capitol Hill (2) Taking a swing

the 30-year-old Democratic candidate Jon Ossoff for being a “Pelosi candidate” and, by proxy, the embodiment of “San Francisco values”. Yet the attacks don’t just come from Republicans. When Ossoff narrowly lost the election – as did the Democratic candidate in a South Carolina special election on the same day – some on the left saw it as a sign that must-win seats had been squandered and the party’s entrenched leadership was to blame. Some have called for Pelosi’s head, seeing her as a liability in the vein of Hillary Clinton (a criticism that’s more than tinged with sexism). Others have argued that the party needs fresh blood to move into the top tier.

Yet Pelosi seems galvanised by being a Trump-attacker-in-chief. On the sticky summer day that she meets MONOCLE she’s fresh off the floor, where she condemned what she later refers to as a “hateful” Republican-backed amendment to a bill – narrowly defeated – to block the military from funding surgery or therapy for transgender members. It’s just one example of her continued zeal to fight for what she sees as core Democratic values. After all, “it is her legacy as much as Obama’s that Republicans are attempting to dismantle right now”, says Zelizer.

She’s going to stick around long enough to make sure that doesn’t happen. Or, at the very least, battle the GOP to the end while it does. — (M)

MONOCLE: The phrase ‘San Francisco values’ has routinely been used as an attack against you. What do you make of that?

NANCY PELOSI: I feel sad for [Republicans who say that]. They’re so bankrupt in their ideas. They don’t have anything to promote themselves with so they have to attack someone else. I was one of the first people to support marriage equality and so when I became part of the leadership in 2002 they kept asking me if I believed in gay marriage. And I said, “Yes I do and I don’t believe in discrimination – and pretty soon you won’t either.” People ask me sometimes if my Catholic faith is contradictory to my support for LGBT rights and I say no,

it’s the complete opposite: it’s where my regard for the dignity of every person springs from.

M: One of your greatest successes was the passing of the Affordable Care Act, which Republicans are intent on repealing. Do you think it’s possible to reach a bipartisan accord on this issue?

NP: Well as soon as they stop the repeal of the Affordable Care Act then we’ll know how we can work together to go forward. But these people think that they can complain for seven years and then go in a dark room for a few days and come out with a bill and expect people to salute. That isn’t legislation. They don’t know what they’re doing. So when you ask, “Can you work with them?” No. We extended a hand of friendship to [Trump]; if he had done the same to us we could have said, “Look, you can have a victory. You can look like you’ve made a lot of changes and we can be respectful of some changes you want but here’s the way you make it work.” But that’s not what they wanted. There’s nothing that we can find common ground on in their bills because they are about the deconstruction of government.

M: Are you concerned by the polarisation of everything from politics to the media in the US?

NP: I think that what the president is doing is very divisive for the country. To attack the watchdog of our democracy – the freedom of the press – is appalling. People made enormous sacrifices [for our freedom]. And here they are squandering it all.

M: You released a statement about Trump’s inner circle meeting with a hostile foreign power. How seriously do you view the Russia debacle?

NP: I take it very seriously because it was an attempt on the part of the Russians, with now possible collusion by the Trump family, to undermine our democracy and our electoral system. The president says it’s just politics – no, it’s not just politics. It’s certainly highly unethical. He says nobody broke

“I don’t intend to lead the way on impeachment because it’s not about Trump and whether he’s a bozo – it’s about the facts and the law”



(1) Pelosi was given the Franklin D Roosevelt Distinguished Public Service Award in 2008 (2) Pelosi is the first and only woman to serve as speaker of the House

the law – well maybe they did. But we need to have an independent outside commission to get further facts.

M: So you want to see an investigation beyond special counsel Robert Mueller?

NP: Mueller is inside the Justice Department, where he reports to a Trump appointee. The House and Senate have investigations but they’re at the speed and mercy of the Republicans in Congress because only they can issue a subpoena. When somebody gives you something from the poisonous tree you give it to the FBI. That is how decent people with an ethical standard conduct [themselves]. The Republicans in Congress are enablers – they don’t want the truth. We need an outside independent commission that doesn’t go as slow as the speaker or the majority leader wants to go in terms of issuing subpoenas and all the rest.

M: You were against the impeachment of George W Bush. Now there is talk of impeachment again. Are you against the notion?

NP: [With Bush] we worked together on many, many issues and we had a respectful relationship. We never said: our goal is to make sure he fails as a president. [With Trump] I can’t prevent anybody from making their case but I don’t intend to lead the way on impeachment because it’s not about him, it’s about the country. It’s not about whether he’s a bozo – it’s about the facts and the law. You cannot impeach unless you have the facts and you have to have an investigation to have the facts. He may self-immolate, he may self-impeach by just breaking the law blatantly – but in terms of what he has done, there needs to be more connecting the dots.

M: Given what’s happening with Russia and the way Trump was shunned at the recent G20 summit, do you think the US is creeping towards being a pariah state?

NP: Not the US. This is a great country. We can withstand even Donald Trump as president of the United States. But

he fawned over Putin from the start, speaking in a negative way about our own country. He even flirted with not having sanctions against Russia. And the Republican party has always been very suspicious of Russia in the tradition of Ronald Reagan. Now all of a sudden its members are looking the other way.

M: Perhaps they're enjoying being back in power.

NP: People say, "How long will it take for Republicans to disassociate themselves from Trump and all his bad policies?" They're [further right] than he is [and have been] for a longer period of time. Gun safety, immigration, women's right to choose: you name any subject, they've been worse for a longer period of time. So he's their guy.

M: Some have said that the Democratic party needs a change of direction given its loss in 2016. What do you think?

NP: We have to communicate better with the American people but we know who we are. Our commitment and our values unite us and our values are to be here for the country's working families. [During the election campaign] Trump was very effective in keeping the attention on himself – even if it was negative it was about him rather than about what we would do. So it now comes back to Congress. In 2005 and 2006 we set out to win Congress and we're setting out to do that again.

M: So you are positive about the midterm elections in 2018?

NP: I think the best opportunity is found in the House of Representatives. I wish the election was today but it isn't. But [Trump's] numbers are so low that I doubt that a lot of Republicans will want to take a chance on running for Congress. A lot depends on where the president's numbers are. When Bill Clinton was president, they won; when George W Bush was president, we won. It's no slam-dunk: we had a very concerted, disciplined, strategic plan to win then. And now we have mobilisation, we have enthusiasm as I've never seen



before. People know it's urgent and they want to take responsibility – that gives us opportunity.

M: In the past the Democratic party was billed as the party of social and economic opportunity. Has it lost that status?

NP: I wouldn't say it has lost that. We may have lost the communication of that message. That's who we are and that's what we have to communicate. And again in 2005 and 2006 [former Democratic senate leader] Harry Reid and I were the opposition. We had a Republican president in the White House so the press paid attention to what we were advocating. When Barack Obama became president there was all the attention on the Republicans in Congress because that was the opposition. Now we have a Republican president so it bequeaths us.

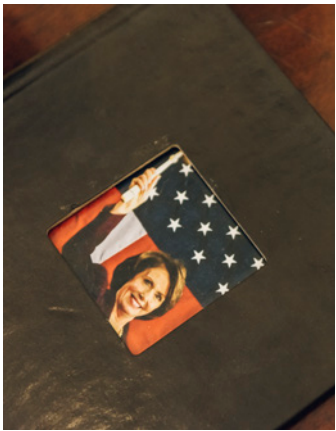
M: How long do you wish to continue in top-tier politics?

NP: I'll tell you the truth: if Hillary Clinton had won I was all set to enjoy life in a different way. I didn't *think* she was going to win – I *knew* she was going to win. And everybody said that we would win the Senate and possibly we could win the House and we'd definitely win the White House. I thought the Affordable Care Act was safe – because that's my thing. And I will fight to the death to protect that. So that's what I'm doing now. So we'll see.

M: In many governments there's an official opposition leader. Is it hard not having that in the US?

NP: It's not a parliamentary system and it would be easier in terms of understanding opposition if it were. But we're where the federal fight is. [Senate minority leader] Chuck Schumer and I are the ones that do that. We work with, and have great respect for, [Democratic National Committee chairman] Tom Perez for building the party and that's a party organisation. Our success in winning Congress to change the dynamic of what is happening here: that rests on Chuck Schumer and on me.

“Now we have mobilisation, enthusiasm as I’ve never seen before. People know it’s urgent and want to take responsibility – that gives us opportunity”



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(1) Aiming to win back Congress
(2) A photo album with an image from Pelosi's acceptance as the first female speaker of the House in 2007 (3) Taking the long view

MONOCLE COMMENT

What's the big idea?

By Sasha Issenberg
Washington correspondent

On the July day that Senate leaders declared the Republicans' latest health-care reform bill dead, Donald Trump resolved to move ahead on that issue without trying to win Democratic votes. "They're obstructionists," Trump told reporters. "They have no ideas."

Trump intended it as a put-down but most Democrats would not reject it. Republicans appear to be demonstrating that they have learned little from the savvy vote-counting that delivered big victories in Barack Obama's first term – notably laws to regulate the health-insurance sector. Democrats, however, are adopting a lesson from the Republican response to the biggest legislative bonanza in more than 40 years: unflinching recalcitrance.

Republicans swathed their revolt in Tea Party imagery. Democrat activists have stylised their obdurate behaviour as "the resistance". Polls show Trump is already historically unpopular, granting Democrats in next year's House elections an advantage and indicating the apparent success of stubborn mindlessness as a strategy. Is it really this simple?

It is easier to hold a coalition together in opposition. All Democrats, for example, oppose Republican proposals to undo Obamacare although there is little consensus about what changes should be made to the health system. The party is divided over issues such as foreign trade but everyone agrees on the wisdom of aggressive investigation of Trump's ties with Russia.

Yet though Democrats were spooked by the 2016 result, it is not yet time to present a governing alternative. The best-case scenario for the party next year would be to claw back control of the House, restoring Nancy Pelosi to the speakership and holding Republicans to their narrow margin in the Senate. In 2020, Democrats could be in a position to fight for both the Senate and the White House. They will hope a more inspiring presidential candidate emerges to present a vision of a post-resistance Democratic agenda. Until then, party officials seem to have concluded, it's better to have no ideas than no power.