



## Seeds of Pelosi's rise planted in the 1990s

By Mike Soraghan – The Hill - 09/28/09

Nancy Pelosi didn't set out to wind up in Congress. Once she got there, she didn't set her sights on leadership.

But that's not to say that her rise to becoming the most powerful woman in American politics happened by accident. Those who know her say it was a combination of opportunity and drive. "She's talented. She's focused. She has an agenda to accomplish," said Rep. John Murtha (D-Pa.), one of Pelosi's closest allies. "She's got more energy than anyone I know." For years, Pelosi rebuffed suggestions that she run for office in California, until her close friend, former Rep. Sala Burton (D-Calif.), asked Pelosi shortly before her death to run for the seat.

Never a backbencher, Pelosi had hit her stride by September 1994, the year The Hill launched. She garnered choice assignments to the Intelligence and Appropriations committees. She had also been named to the ethics panel, which would put her in the middle of the investigation of Rep. Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.) when he became Speaker.

She passed her top domestic priority at the time, a plan to convert the Presidio Army Base above San Francisco to a national park, but only in the House. She would have to add concessions to pass it again in both chambers after Republicans took control in the 1994 election.

Nationally, she emerged as a fierce critic of China's human-rights record. She had embarrassed Chinese officials in 1991 by unfurling a pro-Democracy banner in Tiananmen Square.

And she had surprised many by lashing out against President Bill Clinton that year when he renewed "most-favored nation" trade status for China. Pelosi helped lead the charge against it, chilling her relationship with the Clinton White House.

"The China fight is what raised her stock," said Marc Sandalow, author of a Pelosi biography, *Madam Speaker*. "The Chamber of Commerce very much knew who she was after the China fight." Leadership, though, wasn't on the horizon. It was understood, Sandalow said, that California's "horse" in the leadership races was Rep. Vic Fazio (D-Calif.). That began to change when Fazio announced he wouldn't be running for reelection in 1998.

Pelosi could see a path up the ladder to the top of the caucus. Minority Leader Dick Gephardt (D-Mo.) had his eyes on the presidency. The No. 2, Minority Whip David Bonior (D-Mich.), faced redistricting problems at home.

California had one of the largest Democratic delegations. Pelosi had connections nationwide. Even as she'd focused on her committee work, China and the Presidio, she had traveled around the country raising copious amounts of campaign cash for her fellow Democrats.

“People were telling her, ‘You’ve raised so much money, it’s time for you to call the shots,’ ” Sandalow said.

Her chief rival was Rep. Steny Hoyer (D-Md.), who had made his leadership ambitions clear years before. Pelosi had seconded his nomination for whip in the election Bonior won in 1991. Thus began a now-infamous feud that dragged on for years between Hoyer, Pelosi and their staffs.

By then, the idea of a woman in leadership was attractive to many Democrats who saw theirs as the party of inclusion. But many thought her liberal politics would doom the party to minority status.

The maneuvering dragged on until 2001, when Bonior decided to leave Congress to run for governor. Pelosi prevailed over Hoyer to claim the minority-whip post. When Gephardt left Congress in 2002 to run for president, she became minority leader, the first woman to run a major party in Congress.

**“Speaker Pelosi is the ultimate listener,” said former Rep. Marty Russo (D-Ill.), who is now CEO and senior vice chairman of Cassidy & Associates. “She has successfully united House Democrats issue after issue by listening to her caucus and acknowledging the concerns of its members.”**

And the charge that she was too liberal was answered in 2006 when she led Democrats into the majority, in part by recruiting conservative Democratic candidates. The change in power made Pelosi the first female Speaker in history and the highest-ranking elected woman in the country.

Those who know Hoyer and Pelosi say the rift between them has healed. “I think that’s over,” said Murtha, who unsuccessfully challenged Hoyer for majority leader. “I don’t think there’s any chance of him challenging her.”

Pelosi and the new Democratic leadership team rushed through a series of priorities they had campaigned on, including raising the minimum wage and implementing lobbying restrictions and a new ethics board. By the end of the year, she had steered through an energy bill raising gas mileage standards.

But the issue that helped deliver majority status — the promise to end the Iraq war — also became her “biggest disappointment.” She balanced the centrist and left wings of her parties to pass a bill setting a timetable for withdrawal. But to Democrats’ surprise, most Republicans united to support the unpopular war, and Pelosi didn’t have the votes to override the veto of President George W. Bush.

The inauguration of President Barack Obama changed Pelosi’s role from leader of the opposition to a shepherd of White House policies.

She successfully steered through a massive \$787 billion stimulus package with no Republican votes and twisted arms to pass her priority climate change bill.

In a reprise of that Iraq vote, she is back to balancing the disparate wings of her party on healthcare, in the face of united opposition from Republicans.

As daunting as it is, Sandalow says bringing the two sides of her party together is where Pelosi excels. He argues that in conference, if it gets that far, she will play a key, if not determinative, role.

And if she and other Democratic leaders can get the bill through, there’s no longer a veto waiting at the other end of Pennsylvania Avenue.