

Center for Strategic and International Studies

TRANSCRIPT

Event

“A Conversation with Speaker Emerita Nancy Pelosi: The Art of Power”

DATE

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FEATURING

Speaker Emerita Nancy Pelosi (D-CA)

52nd Speaker of the House of Representatives

CSIS EXPERTS

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Transcript By

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John J. Hamre: Good morning, everybody. Thank you for coming. And delighted to have all of you here. A little rain, but that didn't keep anybody down. It's great that you're here. And a wonderful event. This is part of our Smart Women, Smart Power Program. We started that about 10 years ago. Dr. McInnis has been lifting it up and up and up, and we're so happy about that. And of course, today is a very special day, having Madam Speaker with us.

You know, it's awkward because how do you introduce somebody that's so well known? (Laughter.) OK, and so I'm not going to try. What I want to do is to give context for her book. And there's no job in the world that's as complicated as being speaker of the House. And, you know, the speaker has to integrate five different dimensions of politics. You've got the caucus. That's challenging in its own right. You got all these ambitious, ornery people, and you got to put them into one harness. You know, that's a challenge. You've got the politics of working with the opposite party and all the little games that are going on, that sort of thing.

You've got the politics of House-Senate. That's more complicated than people realize. So there's a dimension to that that people don't know – unless you've worked on the Hill, you understand it a bit. But that's complicated. And the dynamics in the other party have to be considered as you're thinking about your own politics, you know. So then you've got the politics with the White House. And you've had some challenging moments, Madam Speaker. But it's challenging whether it's your party or the other party. You know, there are different dimensions to it, of course. And then, of course, there's the challenge of the politics of speaking to the nation, and having a theme, you know, for the House, having a theme for the party, having a theme for the country.

All of these five dimensions have to be integrated. You don't – you can't have a different agenda in the caucus than you have on the floor of the House, or that you have in working with the president. You know, all of it has to be integrated. Very complicated. And her book, "The Art of Power," is an insight for all of us into what that's like. You know, and all politicians straddle two worlds. They have to straddle the world that exists and the world they want to create. And that challenge is core to anything. This book is a wonderful insight into how Speaker Pelosi has thought about that.

And you have a real privilege today that you have a chance to get this insight. And I want to say thank you to you, Madam Speaker, for being with us today. Kathleen, thank you for leading it. Let's get the real program started. Thank you.

Kathleen
McInnis: Thank you, Dr. Hamre. To business! In 2022, you stepped down as speaker of the House, ushering in an era of new leadership within the Democratic Caucus. How have you balanced fostering a new generation of leadership while continuing to play a role in both politics and policymaking? Has it been a difficult transition for you?

Speaker Emerita
Nancy Pelosi: No. No, it was a glorious transition. (Laughter.) He asked me, what does “emerita” mean? I said, it means happiness. (Laughter.) Because I’m so proud of our leadership. Hakeem Jeffries is wonderful. Katherine Clark, Peter Aguilar, and Ted Lieu, the four top leaders, they’re just remarkable. And now Joe Neguse, part of that as well. So I’m very proud of them and what they will do.

And two things. One is, you always want who comes next to do better. That’s – you know, it’s – we didn’t establish all of this for us to go back. You have to take it forward. And I have confidence that they will. And then, secondly, because I believe in them, I use the analogy of a mother-in-law. Not the mother-in-law in the kitchen, saying my son always likes the stuffing this way. (Laughter.) No, they have to do it their way. And that’s what Kamala Harris has to do, play to her own music as she goes forward, and the president passing the baton to her, and hopefully in a successful election.

So it’s always about recognizing that it’s not about you continuing; it’s about the ideas continuing in a full way. So, no, I’m really happy about it.

The only regret I had was – it wasn’t a regret, but it was a question I had – was I assembled, says she immodestly, the greatest staff ever assembled by the Congress of the United States in its history, nearly 250-year history. And I was, like, oh, the synergy of all of this is going to be lost. But, happily, many of them are part of the new leadership as well.

Dr. McInnis: Long before Washington policy circles were preoccupied with China you were focused on the threat of the Chinese Communist Party, and you mentioned this in your book earlier in your career you made a bold statement by unfurling the pro-democracy banner in Tiananmen Square and more recently, despite many objections from the Biden administration, you became the highest ranking United States government official to travel to Taiwan.

What should the U.S. be doing to counter Chinese – China’s aggressive authoritarian expansionism? What more should we be doing?

Speaker Emerita Well, I think that, as some of you have heard me say – and where’s Dr.

Pelosi: Hamre? Is he still with us? That was spoken like somebody who truly understood the dynamic of the Speaker of the House, before I go on to that question. I say in my book it's a job that has all the responsibility of the presidency without the staff – (laughter) – and without the appointments and all the rest, although I had the greatest staff of all time in the Congress.

So he gave a very fair description of it all and I admired his work in the Defense Department and congratulate you for his leadership here.

In terms of China, we decided to ride a tiger many years ago, 35. Since Tiananmen Square we've always catered to China, whether it was their lack of access to markets for our products into China, whether it was their proliferation of weapons, some of mass destruction to rogue countries, whether it was their – and the security challenge they present and, of course, their complete violation of human rights, whether it's the culture of Tibet and the democracy in Hong Kong, the just general human rights and ability to speak out in China and the situation with the Uyghurs in terms of genocide there, and their threat to Taiwan, and now their support for Russia in the Ukraine fight. That's just counter to any thoughts about democracy that we hold dear and that have been the basis of our own country, and the vision of our Founders, the courage of our men and women at home to protect our freedom and freedom throughout the world, as well as the aspirations of our children for a world at peace in a democracy in our own country as we support it in Ukraine and other places.

Dr. McInnis: And across the different moments in history that you walk us through in your book, a recurring theme that I picked up was the need to place humans and human dignity at the fore of national decision making and the dire strategic consequences for not doing so.

So my question is what advice do you have for current and future leaders regarding what U.S. strategy should look like?

Speaker Emerita Pelosi: Well, again, it's all a consensus in our country – a bipartisan consensus. I will say that in the Congress on the subject of China we have strong bipartisan, overwhelming, almost unanimous consensus. Maybe two or three here or there, but overwhelming consensus on the subjects that I mentioned and that's one place where we have worked together for decades.

Frank Wolf was mentioned earlier today. Chris Smith, so many others, that we have all worked together, and that bridge that we have there serves us well in other areas because of respect that we have for each other in that regard.

Tomorrow – the next couple of days we’ll observe the hundredth birthday of Jimmy Carter, and imagine, he’s been in hospice. He says he’s just going to stay there until he can vote for Kamala and see her inaugurated as president. (Laughter.) I don’t know how long he’s staying in hospice but he’ll be a hundred, and as you know his presidency was marked by a commitment to promoting human rights and human dignity as a basis of our foreign policy.

And, you know, there are equities to be weighed. We have to weigh our national security, we have to weigh our economy, and we have to weigh our governance issues and how we relate to countries and how they treat their people, and the integrity that they have within their own systems and the integrity that we must have in ours.

Dr. McInnis: This is the Smart Women, Smart Power Initiative, and your book is “The Art of Power.” I’d be curious for your thoughts on how you define power. What does power mean to you?

Speaker Emerita Pelosi: Power means to me getting something done for the American people. What is – why are we here? Everybody has to know their why they come to the Congress or engage in public service because this is not for the faint of heart. Once you get into the arena and show any sign of power, you become a target. And I always think of a Presbyterian minister, a bishop in Sierra Leone, and nuns sent me this prayer that he posted on the wall of a hospital there that said: When one day I die and happily go meet my creator, the Lord will say to me, show me your wounds. And I will say, Lord, I – if I say, Lord, I have no wounds, he will say, was nothing worth fighting for? So power is about what you’re willing to fight for, what you need to achieve, but also recognizing that you want consensus to have sustainability for whatever difference that you make. But it is a means to an end.

But it has to be respectful of our oath to protect and defend the Constitution of the United States. Our Constitution defines maybe not power in that word, but the effect of power. And that’s one of the problems we have right now in the debate, because we do not see a commitment to protect and defend the Constitution of the United States, the peaceful transfer of power to others. But it is the ability to get things done.

And the power springs from the people. It doesn’t come from on high; it springs from the people. And so that’s why you want as much bipartisanship, much transparency, amongst accountability to the people for the use of power.

Dr. McInnis: One question that we ask all our guests at Smart Women, Smart Power is whether they feel – whether you feel that your gender as a woman as impacted the decisions you’ve taken and your leadership style. And additionally, you know, the U.S. is on the precipice of potentially electing the first female president in our history. Are there lessons or reflections you would share about being the first woman in a powerful political role that has been traditionally defined by men?

Speaker Emerita Pelosi: Well, I would just say – and I thank you for capturing what the possibilities are. But when I was running for speaker and they were saying things like, “who said she could run” – (laughter) – poor babies. (Laughter.) We have to get permission from you to run when – and you know, they would say things like, well, we have a pecking order here where these people have been waiting in line to go for certain jobs when there’s an opening, and now you’re breaking into the line. I said, no, we’ve been waiting 200 years, OK – more than 200 years. (Laughter, applause.)

But I think this is important to note for Kamala as well. I said to them, don’t vote for me because I’m a woman but don’t vote against me because I’m a woman. I want to tell you why I think I can take the majority, to advance our values, and the rest of that, and that’s the judgment you have to make. And we did then win the majority and did some great things, in my view.

But I think in Kamala’s case people want to know what the person for president means to them in their lives – their jobs, the education of their children, their access to health care, their pension; the kitchen-table issues. It’s self-evident that she’s a woman. I don’t think that point has to be made. It will be very exciting to have a woman president of the United States. But if you’re – there’s nothing like – there’s no average American; everybody is exceptional. But if you’re voting on your kitchen-table issues, you want to know that that person is there for you. Happens to be a woman, that’s icing on the cake.

So I think that she has appropriately focused on the future, her proposals, and the rest, springing from the great work of Joe Biden – not abandoning it, but springing from it to new heights, dancing to her own music as they say in the song.

Dr. McInnis: Well, your book – your book opens with – and you’ve been very public about your calling for more women’s voices in politics. But, tragically, women are often targets of vile misogyny and disinformation campaigns, threats of violence. What thoughts or advice do you have for women who are contemplating answering the call of public service when they’re facing these headwinds? And should our political

institutions be doing anything to help mitigate that risk?

Speaker Emerita
Pelosi:

Well, many times over the years – when I came to Congress there were 12 Democratic women and 11 Republican women. Now, I have 94 – we have 94 Democratic women. We still want more, but we just had to make a – what is this, 435 people, 23 women? The Republicans have, like, tripled their number, we’ve five times it. We’re 94 as opposed to 12. But when we would reach out to women to run, some just reached out themselves. They were self-recruited, but others we would reach out to. They’d say, I could never subject my family to what your family is subjected to. This was just really when I was being demonized, not when they came into our home.

Imagine somebody coming into your home, going into your bedroom, beating your husband over the head with a hammer. It’s something so awful. And then on top of that, right away the other side, making a joke of it. As we don’t even know if my husband’s dead or alive, they’re making a joke of it. Isn’t it funny? And on the internet and in public, governors, president, president’s family – former president, and president’s family.

So what to say to women is they have to – because many of the women that we want to run are younger. See, mine were all in college, or one going into senior in high school. Many of the women we want to run younger, so that they can gain seniority sooner and duh, duh, duh. And they said, we cannot subject our children to what they hear in school. They would always threaten women with making – women have the advantage of being considered more ethical. That’s just the way it was. And so the other side would then say, oh, this person said this or that, to try to question the ethical reputation of the woman.

That’s an ad on TV. Somebody’s family sees it. Their child goes to school, says, your mother’s a crook or, you know, whatever it is. The child comes home crying. There’s almost no way you can say, you should run for office. But so we have to counter that. Well, of course, inoculate against it, first. Counter it because, to the gentleman here, thank you for being here, the – it’s not that women are better than men at the table. It is that – it is that we need that diversity at the table. We absolutely will have better policy, more sustainability, more confidence in the system if people see that their point of view is represented from their standpoint at the table. And as I said before, nothing is more wholesome to our system of governance, politics, or you could apply it to anything – corporate America, the military, whatever – than the fuller participation of women in leadership roles in all of this.

Dr. McInnis:

And our final question, which sort of links back to what Dr. Hamre laid

out for us in the first, which is the separation of powers and the interaction between the Congress and the executive branch. And there's this constant tension between the two branches. You've sat in the middle of these discussions. How do you think that the relationship between the executive branch and the Congress is shaking out today? And where does it need to go?

Speaker Emerita
Pelosi:

Well, I think that the genius of our Constitution is the separation of power. This is so important. We don't have a presidency – I mean – a monarchy. Our founders specifically chose not to have that. And even though George Washington, our patriarch, was so revered, he understood that we're not a monarchy. So there has to be respect between the branches of government, and respect for – the Constitution spells that out.

One of the concerns I have right now is the third branch of government, which is appointed by the first branch of government, cannot be a handmaiden of the first branch. Has to be the enforcer of the Constitution of the United States. But that genius of the Constitution is what makes us the country we have been and will continue to be. And, again, it's with respect for different roles – our respect for theirs, their respect for ours. And it is – so I love being in the House because it is a place where, as I've said to some of you before, it's like the bandwagon with ideas going forward. And the Senate is like a convoy, going as slow as the slowest ship. (Laughter.) So we have that competition; and then the White House having its view, but also knowing that they have to have the votes in the Congress to get the job done.

By and large, it's a pretty exciting thing to have a difference of opinion, to have your discussion to find the consensus for our country. And up until now, up until recently – say, eight years ago – that was the case. And now we have to return to that. And I keep saying take back your party to the Republicans, take it back to the Grand Old Party that has done so much for our country.

Unfortunately, duty calls and my day job is calling me and I have to leave now. But I thank you all for being here today, for the role that you all play, one way or another. It's always an honor for me when the ambassador, Markarova, from Ukraine is here, because the fight for the people – of the people of Ukraine for democracy is a model to the world, one that we must support in the strongest possible way, and again, across our country. It's at risk in our own Congress, where we have a Putin – what do you call it? – clique. Can you imagine? We have a Putin clique on the Republican side of the aisle.

So again, there are some areas where we're talking about timing on

issues and the extent to which we go forth. There are other times where it's a big values debate. And when we have that debate we have to stand strong, because it really is a matter of conscience, Constitution, and the constituencies that we run, and conscience.

So thank you all for being here. And some of this is explained more fully in the book.

Kathleen, thank you, President Hamre. We call him Mr. President. We call him Mr. Secretary; so many titles, so much talent. And I'm so proud of the understanding he has of the role of speaker of the House.

Dr. McInnis: Well, please join me in thanking Madam Speaker. It's been an honor.
(Applause.)

(END.)