

At the foot of the House Speaker's chair:

How Nancy Pelosi climbed her stairway to Heaven

While a consistent supporter of labor unions, women's rights and domestic partners, the House Minority Leader is accused of sabotaging campaign finance reform, auctioning off the Presidio, shielding corrupt Republicans and persecuting Democrats who won't keep quiet.

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If you weren't living in San Francisco back in 1987, you missed a real dogfight of an election in the eighth congressional district. This is the seat Congresswoman Nancy Pelosi won that year and has held ever since. She's up for re-election again this year, but there's no drama about what the outcome will be. Unless you consider the fact that she may become the first female Speaker of the House in U.S. history.

The Democrats need to pick up 15 seats around the country in order to re-take the House back from the Republicans. Plausible as that may ring in theory, decades of gerrymandering and persisting concerns about the trustworthiness of electronic voting equipment should preclude anyone from getting too giddy about the



House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi at the opening of the Letterman Digital Arts Center in the city's Presidio in 2005. To her right are Senator Barbara Boxer and filmmaker George Lucas.

future of Capitol Hill.

Since 1998, some 98 percent of incumbents have been re-elected. And former Speaker of the House Tom DeLay cemented Republican control of Congress when he engineered the redrawing of Texas districts in 2003. Six Democratic seats were transferred to the Republican column. Although the U.S. Supreme Court rejected DeLay's redistricting plan this June, none of those party gains were immediately threatened.

Still, Pelosi and her crew are optimistic. One reason is that an increasing number of conservatives are running as Democrats in primary elections. In Florida, for instance, former Republican Tim Mahoney won his primary and is now vying for page predator Mark Foley's seat in the general election

this month.

But getting back to San Francisco, a beloved liberal icon by the name of Phillip Burton once served as the eighth district Congressional representative. Both middle-of-the-road Democrats and determined progressives worshipped, and this at a time of deep social divide within the country.

Remember, some two decades ago the first President Bush was serving as director of the C.I.A. and then later as Vice-President alongside Ronald Reagan. The Ayatollah Khomeini was the terrorist of note, while the Sandinistas in Nicaragua played the role now occupied by Al Qaida, lurking as they did within "two days' driving time" of the American border.

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Yet, unlike many Democrats today, Congressman Burton was not one to buckle in the face of each dubious threat to national security peddled by an Administration acting outside the rule of law. At a dinner benefit for the group Medical Aid For El Salvador, for instance, Burton stood up in the Sheraton Palace banquet room and announced he would donate a thousand dollars out of his own pocket.

(A few days later, it seems a volunteer for the same charity who was canvassed Burton's neighborhood knocked on the congressman's door and asked for a contribution. "But I just gave you a thousand dollars!" he shirked, understandably flabbergasted. His wife Sala then patiently appeared with her checkbook and wrote out a second donation.)

When Burton died of heart failure in 1983, it was Sala who took his place in Washington. For the most part, San Franciscans were relieved that the same congressional staff would continue to represent the district. However, three years later Sala fell ill herself.

That's when, legend has it, Nancy Pelosi entered the hospital where the widow lay dying and received a deathbed endorsement.

Not everyone, however, accepted that *fait accompli*. Three members of the San Francisco Board of Supervisors tossed their hats in the ring and a real race was on for the vacant seat.

A Democratic party fundraiser who had never held public office before, Pelosi managed to outspend all of her opponents combined. She was even rumored to be paying campaign volunteers a minimum wage.

Across town, openly gay supervisor Harry Britt, meanwhile, managed to keep pace with Mrs. Pelosi in the polls. With the help



photo: Pelosi website

Rep. Pelosi with Jordan's Queen at a 2004 event sponsored by the San Francisco based Global Fund for Women.

of one of the city's top political hacks, Britt waged a formidable threat, using a combination of TV attack ads (some of which were downright misogynist), and a groundswell of grassroots volunteers.

That year the local chapter of the National Women's Political Caucus endured one of its more contentious endorsement meetings. Its membership was split on Nancy Pelosi, and by the end of a long evening, no decision had been reached.

The climax to the electoral cliffhanger came when a local gay newspaper ran a story, shortly before election day, claiming Britt was a political lightweight and incompetent who would be an embarrassment to the city if elected to Congress.

Whether the reporting was accurate or not, the bombshell revelation, along with Mrs. Pelosi's television spots and a strong third-place finish by another supervisor, Doris Ward, all kicked in to put the wealthy socialite over the top.

Not that anyone seems to mind, but Rep. Pelosi is the wife of an investment banker and eighth richest member of Congress. Over the years she has remained generally popular among voters, perhaps because neither the press nor the local Republican

Party ever criticize her. And with unlimited financing always available, she has never faced serious opposition in any subsequent elections.

What is a little dumbfounding is that the congresswoman elected in 1987 has risen so far up the ranks in the Democratic Party, so fast. In fact, the 66-year old mother of five, if she becomes the next Speaker of the House, would be just "two heartbeats away" - as *60 Minutes* recently put it - from assuming the office of President of the United States.

Strange but true.

"Pelosi rode into power on the aspirations of the women's movement," says Krissy Keefer, the not very well known Green Party candidate running against the House Minority Leader this year. "She's a complete and utter Washington insider primarily concerned with her career and her personal milestones."

As off in left field as that may sound, the San Francisco representative has indeed found herself in rather unseemly circumstances during her two decades in office. In 2003, she and then Senate Minority Leader Tom Daschle blocked the reappointment of an ardent campaign finance reformer, Scott Thomas, whose seat on the Federal Elections Commission was up for renewal.

In his place, they nominated Robert Lenhard, the associate general counsel for the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME). Earlier that year, Lenhard had signed a brief on behalf of the AFL-CIO arguing that the recently passed McCain-Feingold campaign finance reform legislation was unconstitutional.

A three-judge panel agreed and struck down part of the law,

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but the Supreme Court later upheld the act in 2004. Still, President Bush appointed Lenhard to the bipartisan FEC, where he continues to serve today.

At the time of that nomination, Larry Noble, the executive director of the Center for Responsive Politics, was heard to exclaim, "The people behind Lenhard and removing Thomas are the people who professed a belief in the new law and who argued for passage of the new law," said Noble. "I'm talking about Daschle and Pelosi. They stated it was good policy and needed to be the law of the land. It's tremendously cynical of them to put someone on the commission who is not going to enforce the law."

More recently, the Tom Delay fiasco cast a similarly Shakespearean shadow over the congresswoman. That's because she went to bat for DeLay by discouraging other Democrats from taking action to have him removed from office. Evidently, at the same time the district attorney of Austin, Texas was issuing indictments against Delay for misdirecting millions of dollars in campaign funds, Rep. Pelosi was accused of cutting a deal with the Republican Party not to pursue ethics charges.

In particular, Texas Democrat Chris Bell said she ordered him not to file a complaint against DeLay. Just a few months earlier, Bell had been one of the casualties of the DeLay orchestrated restructuring of Texas congressional districts.

Bell went ahead and submitted his complaint to the House Ethics Committee. And thereafter the reprisals began, he says, at the behest of House Minority Leader Pelosi.

"One of the hardest parts of his career was how little support he got from the leadership for filing a complaint against some-



photo: McKinney website

Rep. Cynthia McKinney (speaking) has denounced Rep. Pelosi and other Democratic leaders for their passivity in addressing Bush Administration failures. Ever since she was first elected, the Georgia congresswoman has repeatedly faced grueling Democratic primaries. In August, she lost her seat for a second time.

body as unethical as Tom DeLay," Melanie Sloan, executive director of Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington, said during a recent segment of the weekly PBS newsmagazine NOW. "This has been a problem in Congress for a while now, where the inmates are basically running the asylum. There is no oversight over Congress."

Apparently trying to cover up their indiscretions, Pelosi and other high-ranking Democrats would later invite Bell to speak at one of their functions during his last days in Congress. Taking turns, they proceeded to congratulate and thank him for all he had done to get DeLay removed from office.

Meanwhile, back on the Hill, the House Ethics Subcommittee effectively shut its doors for the next year, just as the Jack Abramoff and other corruption scandals were gaining traction.

So far only one representative besides DeLay has been removed from office in connection to Abramoff, and that's Congress-

man Randy "Duke" Cunningham, who pleaded guilty to accepting over \$2 million in bribes. He is currently serving out a sentence in a federal penitentiary.

Perhaps hoping to avoid their own trip down to the local police station, both Senate Majority Leader Tom Frist and another Republican, Bob Ney, have tendered their resignations. Frist is accused of stock fraud, Ney of taking bribes from Abramoff.

Many Washington observers say they are but the tip of the iceberg.

For her part, Pelosi has repeatedly denied that she entered into any agreement or truce with the Republican Party not to investigate corruption. She claims DeLay's replacement as House Majority Leader, Dennis Haster, removed all the Republicans on the ethics committee, along with the staff, when they issued three reprimands to DeLay in response to the Bell complaint.

Haster then appointed a party

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Photo by Luke Thomas

Green Party candidate Krissy Keefer (left) at campaign kickoff party Sept. 10th with daughter Frederika (right)), niece Devon Hill and Quinn Van Antwerp (top), her nephew.

loyalist, Doc Hastings, as the new chair, and Hastings named his own senior aide as the subcommittee's lead investigator. That's when Pelosi says she pulled the Democrats out in protest.

The problem with this explanation, Sloan and other critics point out, is that at the time House Minority Leader Pelosi was warning Chris Bell not to file his complaint, the ethics committee was still intact.

And this isn't the only time the Democratic leadership has boycotted a House committee. Rep. Pelosi ordered Democrats to stay away from the select committee that examined the federal response to Hurricane Katrina, claiming it would be a whitewash.

Yet far from pussyfooting around the Bush Administration's abject failure in handling that disaster, the committee produced a 600-page report which blamed all levels of government. It also took aim at Secretary of Homeland Se-

curity Michael Chertoff, who had decided to attend a conference on bird flu while the levees in New Orleans were spilling over.

Democratic Representative Cynthia McKinney, the first African American woman elected to Congress from Georgia, defied the Katrina panel boycott and participated in the committee sessions. Afterwards she slammed Pelosi and other members of the party leadership for turning their backs on the hurricane victims and making no real effort to go after Chertoff, who continues to preside over Homeland Security.

Like Chris Bell, the Georgia congresswoman got the cold shoulder from the top Democrat in the House during much of her term in office. McKinney was defeated in her own primary this past August, targetted by the pro-Israeli lobbying group known as AIPAC.

Ironically, the undefeated Nancy Pelosi today finds herself in

a position not unlike Tom DeLay. Her campaign fund has more than doubled in recent years as corporations and other interest groups fill her coffers, no doubt hedging their bets should the House of Representatives fall back into Democratic hands. *Sixty Minutes* also credits her with raising an astounding \$100 million dollars for the Democratic Party to use in this year's congressional elections.

Locally, detractors like Keefer point to the Presidio privatization as an example of Pelosi's greater allegiance to America's corporate elite rather than her own constituents.

It was during the Clinton Administration, after all, when the congresswoman lobbied for the idea of allowing a trust to broker the future of the land, rather than creating a national park. That's what her predecessor Phillip Burton thought he had chiseled into law with landmark legislation in 1978.

Since the Presidio Trust was formed, the federal government has been selling off the property bit by bit. Currently on the auction block is the land encompassing the old public hospital near 15th Avenue and Lake Streets in the Richmond District. The area has been eyeballed by developers who intend to build luxury apartments there.

Local area residents fear the project will generate traffic congestion and cut off their access to the trails and roads that lead out to Baker Beach.

Keefer also contends that Rep. Pelosi has been playing fast and loose with the military conversion project underway in the Bayview Hunters Point district. "The goal is to sell all of these off to the private sector", she maintains.

Sometimes referred to as the Grover Norquist approach to government, the long-range

objective of such asset liquidation, when combined with the President's intensifying billions of dollars in war debt, is to cripple the country's bureaucracy so it can no longer function. One of America's leading arch-conservatives, Norquist has stated publicly that he'd like to see the government hobbled to the point where he can "drag it home and drown it in my bathtub".

Green Party candidate Keefer is the mother of two kids and the founder of the Wallflower Dance Collective, a Bay Area performing arts group started in 1975, but which has since disbanded. During her time performing, Keefer traveled widely and says she has given dozens of interviews on behalf of activist causes, including international women's rights.

She has called for an end to the Iraq occupation and the impeachment of the President before he can do any more damage to the country. (Pelosi has pledged not to instigate such proceedings if she becomes Speaker of the House.) Keefer also wants to see some form of gas rationing in the United States to reduce the fossil fuel emissions responsible for global warming.

Along with Keefer, Republican candidate Mike DeNunzio and Libertarian Philip Berg are vying for Rep. Pelosi's seat in the Nov. 7th general election. At press time, the congresswoman had refused to debate any of her challengers.

Note: Several requests to Congresswoman Pelosi's office for an interview were made by The City Edition. However, no one on her staff was available.