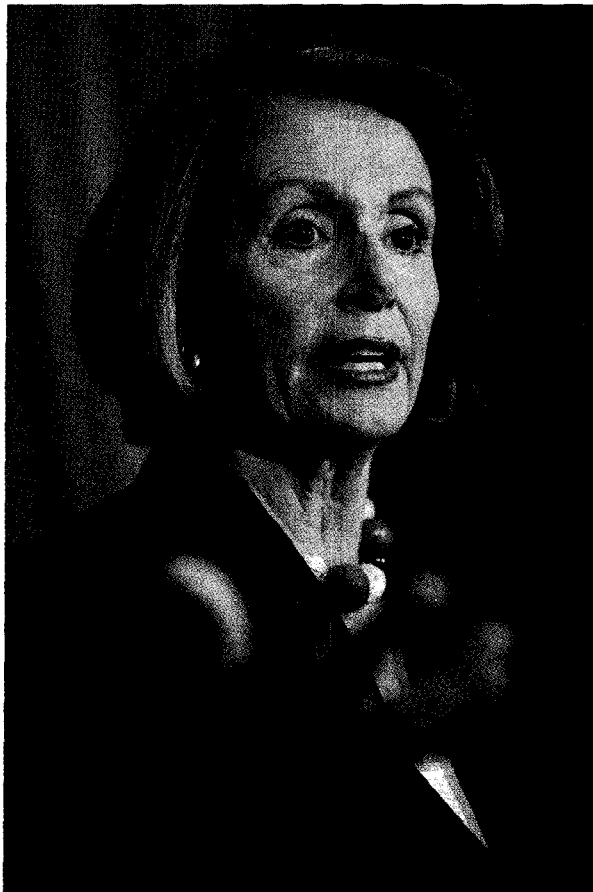




# Toxic Nancy

by John H. Fund

**G**ROWING UP IN SAN FRANCISCO, I met Nancy Pelosi when I was a young reporter. She was then chair of the California Democratic Party, and I will always remember her gracious manner and patience toward me. But that “gentle lady” bears little resemblance to the hard-nosed House Speaker who treats her Democratic colleagues like soldiers in a boot camp and brooks no criticism. Power may corrupt, as Lord Acton told us, but it can also coarsen.



Republicans may chafe under Pelosi’s iron rule, but they also optimistically think she is politically toxic for Democrats. A late July Rasmussen poll found her with a favorable rating of 35 percent and an unfavorable rating of 57 percent, for a net deficit of 22 points. What’s more, those who have a very unfavorable opinion of Pelosi overwhelm those who regard her very favorably—by a five-to-one margin—45 percent to 9 percent. “House Speaker Nancy Pelosi is one of the most despised political figures in the country,” *Politico* concluded in July. “Month after month of polling shows that the Speaker is neither trusted nor liked by the general public.”

It’s true a Speaker is an inside player and can remain strong if she has the support of her caucus. Until now, Pelosi has. “You don’t have to love her, but she’s good,” one Northeastern Democrat told *Politico*. “She’s solid with us, and that’s all that matters, although she could take a real hit internally if we bungle the health care bill.”

If that happens, observers will say the bill began taking on water when it became clear that allowing her committee chairmen to write provisions far more radical than President Obama’s original proposal was a disaster in the making. As the costs of the bill mounted, Pelosi continued to insist it represented “real change” for patients because it would mean “a cap on your [health care] costs, but no cap on your benefit.”

This was either delusional or disingenuous. Moderate Blue Dog Democrats realized that under the bill the House was drafting, voters would face steeply rising taxes and premiums along with restrictions on their health care choices. The 40 or so Blue Dogs from House districts that John McCain carried began to get nervous. While they recognized that Pelosi could probably ram through a bill in the House, they also knew they would be politically vulnerable if the Sen-

ate voted it down, leaving them exposed for having supported an unpopular—and failed—piece of legislation. Even if the Senate passed it, the bill might trigger a voter backlash as early as 2010.

Many Blue Dogs also resented the pressure—which came close to arm-breaking—that Pelosi used to secure a 219 to 212 victory for the cap and trade bill designed to combat global warming, but which in reality amounted to a large tax increase. To win, Pelosi forced the bill to the floor only hours after its final version was ready and rejected even a vote on most proposed amendments.

Ironically, Pelosi used to decry such “win at all costs” tactics when she was minority leader. Back in 2004, she unveiled a proposed “Bill of Rights” that called on the then-majority Republicans to stop holding roll-call votes past the normal 15 minutes, to allow amendments to bills, and to give members time to read what they were voting on. In 2006, just before becoming Speaker, Pelosi reiterated her plans to “ensure the rights of the minority” and to set “a higher standard” for fairness.

Despite those pledges, the new Democratic majority quickly adopted a whatever-it-takes approach to passing legislation. A dubious ethics bill was passed fewer than 24 hours after being introduced. The bill expanding health care coverage to children was rewritten at 1 a.m., a rule harshly limiting debate was passed at 3 a.m., and the bill was sent to the floor for a final vote the same day. “In the House the elbows have become as sharp as razor blades,” political scientist Larry Sabato lamented.

**T**HIS YEAR, the stimulus package was rushed through without public vetting, in part because the Speaker had to fly to Italy over the weekend. She apparently thought it best for voters to learn about the bill’s contents—such as the wildly unpopular bonuses to federal bailout recipient AIG—only after Barack Obama had signed it into law.

But Pelosi’s opportunism—her ability to pursue a left-wing agenda with little media criticism—proved to be a major embarrassment in “Waterboardgate,” where her credibility in national security matters was badly hurt. The incident began when an internal report by the Director of National Intelligence was leaked to ABC News last spring. For weeks, the Speaker had insisted that although briefed on the “enhanced interrogation” techniques used against al Qaeda suspects after 9/11, she wasn’t told that the harsh techniques were being used—only that they might be used.

This distinction allowed her to bash the Bush administration for its controversial decisions to use harsh measures on a small number of top terrorist detainees. Pelosi has demanded a “truth commission” that would look into whether acts of “torture” were used.

The only problem was that the DNI report contradicted her claim. The report clearly laid out details of a September 2002 briefing in which Pelosi,

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who served as the ranking Democrat on the House Intelligence Committee, was told about the methods used to interrogate Abu Zubaydah, a top al Qaeda suspect. The report clearly states that Pelosi was given “a description of the particular EITs [Enhanced Interrogation Techniques] that had been employed.”

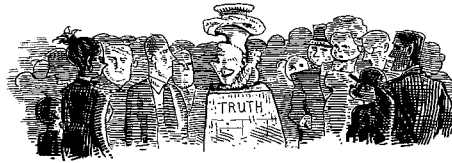
“It’s an outrage that she can posture as someone who didn’t know what was going on when she clearly did and raised no objections when briefed on it seven years ago,” noted Rep. Pete Hoekstra, the former GOP chairman of the Intelligence Committee.

But Pelosi’s office wasn’t giving an inch. Brendan Daly, a Pelosi spokesman, told ABC News that her “recollection of the meeting is different than the way it is described in the report from the DNI’s office.”

That defense could be used to explain many of Speaker Pelosi’s blunders. A master of political muscle, she has a weak grasp of issues and stubbornly sticks to her talking points even after they’ve become “inoperative.” That helps explain her refusal to acknowledge the objections of Blue Dogs over the obvious soaring costs of the health care bill as well as her insistence that the stimulus bill’s pork-barrel projects were “investments in America’s future.”

Although Republicans will try to make her a political piñata in next year’s elections, the real threat to Speaker Pelosi’s tenure comes from her fellow Democrats. More and more of them view her as Republicans came to view Speaker Newt Gingrich in the 1990s: a historic figure who brought them to the majority but proved to be an albatross around their necks once he had been office several years. ❧

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# Kazakh Hospitality

by Jonathan Aitken

**W**ELCOME TO THE GREAT PYRAMID, not of ancient Egypt but of 21st-century Kazakhstan. Towering over the surrounding steppes, this 290-foot glass edifice, aka the Palace of Peace and Reconciliation, hosts a triennial interfaith conference called the Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions. Your High Spirits columnist went along for the ride that was occasionally bumpy, sometimes boring, yet always intriguing as a springboard toward new thinking about the role of religions in today's world.

The Eurasian setting was a reminder that spiritually as well as economically, the global center of gravity is shifting eastward. The conference's cast of 77 delegations could never have been assembled in a Western capital. In their flowing robes, the caravanserai of saffron-clad Shintoists, crimson cardinals, black-hatted Orthodox, magenta muftis, turbaned Taoists, Nehru-suited Hindus, and multicolorful Zoroastrians outwardly gave an illusion of pluralism and tolerance.

For all that, the conference began on a note of intolerant protest, when the first keynote speaker, President Shimon Peres of Israel, delivered the seemingly unexceptional line, "We must separate religion from terror." This triggered a walkout by the large Iranian contingent. Their exit, however, was more of a ritual than a reality. For the mullahs of Tehran reappeared throughout all succeeding sessions of the Congress, genially mingling with Israel's chief rabbis from the Sephardic, Ashkenazi, and Orthodox traditions. The senior ayatollah present was even seen to exchange fraternal hugs with the ranking Anglican bishop.

Those embraces made a useful point amidst formal proceedings that at times seemed rather pointless. There is a limit to how often familiar interfaith buzzwords such as peace, dialogue, harmony, understanding, and cooperation can bear repetition, par-

ticularly when coming from doubtful exponents of such virtues. Nevertheless, the personal sincerities outweighed the public hypocrisies. For the Congress did manage to create a safe space in which stereotypes could be shed, frictions eased, and relationships established. One of the most effective speakers to recognize this was the American Orthodox leader Leonid Kishkovsky, president of Christian Churches Together. "Interfaith dialogue does not mean finding the lowest common denominator in religion. It should mean full integrity in disclosing our different principles," he said.

There were times when an apparent absence of integrity became too much for some delegates. The ayatollah-hugged Anglican bishop, Nicholas Baines of Croydon, was moved to feisty impatience by a Hindu swami declaring that he represented a nation of peace. "We are in danger of colluding in a fantasy," riposted Baines. "Why do Indians say they live in peace when they have inflicted such suffering on the Christians of Orissa?"

Your High Spirits columnist joined in the rebellion against platitudes after 10 successive platform speakers in a tedious session titled "Solidarity in a Period of Crisis" failed to make a single mention of the need for interfaith solidarity against religious persecution. Wearing my hat as honorary president of the advocacy human rights group Christian Solidarity Worldwide, I complained about the surprising omission of concern at the conference about the systematic persecution of believers of all faiths by the regimes in some pariah countries such as North Korea and Burma. Interestingly, the chairman of the Kazakhstan Senate, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, who was presiding over the Congress, said afterward that he supported my intervention and would ensure that the next conference would hold a special session on persecution. So that was progress.