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House Speaker Nancy Pelosi Is One for the Ages

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In 1983, a study of leadership in the House of Representatives concluded that “the House has always been a dynamic institution. No sooner do we think we’ve reached the resolution of the play than a creative leader steps on-stage, picks up plot threads we had barely noticed, and uses them to begin a new act.”

The authors of *Kings of the Hill* were Richard B. Cheney, then a Wyoming congressman, and Lynne V. Cheney. They could not have foreseen that one of those great House speakers would be the first Italian-American,

the first Californian, and the first grandmother to preside over the House.

Of the 52 Americans who served as House speakers since 1789, great ones are few. Nancy Pelosi’s name is on the list. The standards are degree of difficulty, innovation, and effectiveness.

The Cheneys, like other scholars, agree on Henry Clay of Kentucky, who in 1811 began organizing the House to prevent its eclipse by the presidency and the Senate. Ditto for Thomas Brackett Reed of Maine, who in the 1890s deployed a sharp tongue and a keen eye to enforce accountability. Reed banned stalling tactics and the “disappearing quorum,” which allowed members to duck votes by pretending they were absent. He did not always make friends, but he made history; Reed’s statue has been standing guard over his native Portland for 100 years.

From the 1940s until the 1960s, Sam Rayburn of Texas was the longest-serving speaker. He democratized

the House Rules Committee, where Southerners had stifled civil rights and other Democratic party goals. Only a speaker with Confederate roots could have done that.

Massachusetts has produced eight speakers, twice the number of any other state. I knew three of them, each a repository of history: Joseph W. Martin Jr. of North Attleborough, son of a blacksmith, first elected to the House in 1924; John W. McCormack of Dorchester, son of a hod carrier, first elected in 1928; and Thomas P. “Tip” O’Neill Jr. of Cambridge, son of a bricklayer, first elected in 1952.

All flourished in an atmosphere of civility, a concept alien to Congress today. “Some Republicans resented my long, treasured friendship with Sam Rayburn,” Martin told me. “But we were playing musical chairs with the speakership. He’d win one year and I’d win another. It made sense to get along. We had fanatics on our side, but I was never a fanatic.” Rayburn reciprocated, saying he would vote for Martin if he lived in Massachusetts.

For a House speaker, friends can be as hazardous as foes, as McCormack recalled before he left Congress in 1970: “There are zealots on our side, fine men and women, and I sympathize with them. In the Massachusetts Legislature, I was called a socialist and a Bolshevik. Zealots can have good ideas, but you’ve got to get to 218.”

Corralling 218 colleagues, the House majority, is the speaker’s job. O’Neill’s decade as speaker proved his mathematical gifts, but in dealing with President Reagan,

his sense of fairness was historic. Civility helped the country and O’Neill’s party. “We will oppose but we will not obstruct,” the Tipper told the Gipper, “and after 5 o’clock, we’ll have drinks.”

O’Neill believed that politics was the art of compromise. He was not naïve. “Once in a while, you have to muscle your friends or they’ll take you for granted,” he told Democrats. Pelosi heeded that advice this year when abortion-rights opponents balked at President Obama’s health care bill. Her most loyal adherents were female, liberal abortion-rights supporters. To pass the bill, she had to muscle them.

Compared with the legislative roadblocks impeding her predecessors, Pelosi has faced a Sierra Nevada of obstacles. The House minority’s everyday tactic, overall strategy, and one-word vocabulary is “No.” Clay, Reed, Rayburn, and O’Neill cajoled, bargained with, and intimidated their own members. Pelosi must also cope with the Other Body’s addiction to the routine filibuster. Any motion dicier than accepting the chaplain’s prayer requires 60 votes in the Senate.

When her father, Thomas D’Alessandro Jr., represented Baltimore in the House in the 1940s, the Roosevelt-Truman era produced an alphabet soup of agencies that most Americans believed in, even admired. The near-collapse of capitalism in 2008 under former president Bush produced

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a hasty bank bailout, then an emergency stimulus bill, a massively confusing, unappetizing stew.

Since the 1830s, economics has created an iron rule of midterm elections: If jobs don't come back, the opposition party will. If Pelosi loses her speakership, there's little shame in that. Reed lost his once, Rayburn twice.

Four years before Pelosi arrived in Congress, the Cheneys assessed "the power of strong individuals to reshape the forms they find." Her record meets their scholarly standard of "individuals who have created—and re-created—an institution." Nancy Pelosi is "controversial" because she is effective. She knows how to get to 218.