

THEMATIC REVIEW

## Four Analyses of Nancy Pelosi as Speaker

**Molly Ball, *Pelosi*. Henry Holt, 2020. 368 pages. \$27.99 cloth/  
\$18.00 paper.**

**John A. Lawrence. *Arc of Power: Inside Nancy Pelosi's  
Speakership, 2005–2010*. University of Kansas Press, 2023. 384  
pages. \$34.95 cloth.**

**Susan Page, *Madam Speaker: Nancy Pelosi and the Lessons of  
Power*. Twelve Books, 2021. 448 pages. \$32.50 cloth/\$18.99  
paper.**

**Ronald M. Peters, Jr., and Cindy Simon Rosenthal, *Speaker  
Nancy Pelosi and the New American Politics*. Oxford  
University Press, 2010. 334 pages. \$68.00 cloth.**

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Nancy Pelosi makes history. She was the first woman elected to a high-ranking position in the US House of Representatives when she became the Democratic Whip in 2001. She made more history as the first female Democratic Leader in 2003, and first woman elected as Speaker of the House in 2007. She made history by remaining the Democratic Leader even after losing the House majority. Pelosi made history yet again when she was again elected Speaker in 2019, joining Sam Rayburn as the only House leader to lose and then regain the Speakership.

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Pelosi's history-making rise and lengthy tenure as the leader of the Democratic Party led to the publication of several books, targeted to different audiences. This essay reviews four of these books – one written by scholars (Peters and Rosenthal), one by a Capitol Hill staffer (Lawrence), and two by reporters (Ball and Page).

Taken chronologically, Peters and Rosenthal and Lawrence cover Pelosi's rise to power and portions or all of her first speakership. Ball and Page cover Pelosi's career through her years as the Democratic (minority) Leader from 2011 to 2019, her return to the Speaker's chair, and events through the 2020 presidential election. Both Ball's and Page's books end before Pelosi stepped away from the leadership in 2023.

Ron Peters and Cindy Simon Rosenthal place Nancy Pelosi's rise into the context of the "new American politics," which is characterized by "five interrelated elements: partisanship, money, organization, technology, and representation" (2010, 9). The new American politics is focused on partisanship and its culture wars; the increasing importance of money in elections; the use of communications technology that leads to the "permanent campaign;" and the growing diversity of elected officials. Within this context and the context of the literature on the American Speakership, they analyze primarily Pelosi's first Congress as Speaker, the 110<sup>th</sup>. Peters and Rosenthal identify characteristics of Pelosi's leadership style that become themes in the later works, principally her ability to place loyalists in key positions, her flexible approach to seniority, her knowledge of the details of legislation, her fundraising talent, and her willingness to get enmeshed in the deal making needed to pass laws. They note too, that Pelosi's gender is a factor, but not the defining factor, of her leadership style. They correctly predict that "she's not done" (2010, 250-252).

John Lawrence's *Arc of Power* focuses on the five-year period from 2006, the year before Pelosi's election as Speaker, to 2010, when the Democrats lost control of the House. Lawrence, an historian, and long-time congressional insider, was Pelosi's chief of staff for a total of eight years, including 2007–2011. His memoir is based upon thousands of pages of personal notes and the narrative is peppered with direct quotations from key actors; descriptions of facial expressions, seating arrangements, and gestures; and textboxes that provide interesting asides and insightful recollections. These delightful details enliven the narrative and provide an insider's knowledge of the messiness of policy making, the policy makers' personalities, and the complexity of their relationships. Lawrence recounts and analyzes how Pelosi shepherded the Democratic caucus through fractious political battles, including the Affordable Care Act, the legislation to forestall an economic disaster in 2008, the Dodd-Frank reform, and the unpopular Iraq war. Power is "perishable" (p. 287) he concludes. He notes that in just four short years, Pelosi was transformed from the mother figure who welcomed children to the podium to a wildly unpopular figure who was demonized by the right.

Lawrence also observed how Pelosi, Presidents GW Bush and Obama, and other congressional leaders had to contend with ever more fractious party caucuses. Even so, Lawrence concludes that House Democrats often had to

accept more moderate legislation than they preferred to fit through “the Senate’s sixty-vote keyhole” (p. 288). Looking back, Lawrence probably realizes that working with a Senate with a sixty-vote majority—rather than the 51-vote majority in the current Congress – places these erstwhile Democrats in an enviable position.

Molly Ball (2020) and Susan Page (2021) both wrote journalistic accounts inspired by Pelosi’s long tenure as Democratic leader and her second ascension to the Speakership after the 2018 election. Both books are based on extensive interviews with Pelosi, other Democrats, and unnamed Washington insiders. Molly Ball focuses primarily on Pelosi the legislator and the leader, with very interesting descriptions of policy initiatives from Pelosi’s perspective, as well as recounting her various leadership challenges. For her part, Susan Page devotes more space to Pelosi’s backstory, including interviews with her family members, trips to her parents’ ancestral homes in Italy, and archival research. Ball’s book ends with Pelosi’s decision to pursue the first impeachment against President Trump, with the words, “The times ... have found us today” (Ball 2020, 314). Page’s book ends with the events of January 6, 2021, with the note that the insurrection led to a second Trump impeachment.

Both Ball and Page obviously admire Pelosi and her skill as both a legislator and a leader. Their narrative is peppered with anecdotes where Pelosi dealt with sexism, microaggressions, partisan and bipartisan posturing, and accusations from moderates that she was too liberal and charges from progressives that she was too moderate. However, time and again, Pelosi manages to keep her caucus together, negotiate with her opponents, and advance many of her legislative goals. Yet both Ball and Page tell stories not of a woman leader, but a supremely talented politician, legislator, and leader who happens to be female and feminine.

Ball and Page augment Lawrence’s book nicely by continuing Pelosi’s story beyond her first Speakership. Lawrence’s “arc of power” is gaining, exercise, and loss of political power, as represented by Pelosi’s initial ascension to the Speakership and its loss four years later. Ball and Page show us that, contrary to what Lawrence implies at the end of his memoir, that Pelosi’s power was not lost, but changed. Certainly, she did not hold as much power as she did as Speaker. Yet Pelosi, as the leader of the minority Democrats, successfully secured many Democratic priorities, especially on must-pass legislation, by successfully exploiting the Republicans’ internal strife.

All four books are useful to scholars of gender and politics, Congress, and the American Speakership. Peters and Rosenthal provide a context and theoretical foundation that is the backdrop for all four volumes but not articulated elsewhere. Lawrence’s “arc of power” theory provides another useful theory that demonstrates that how power varies over time. This theory can be applied to Pelosi’s long leadership career and McCarthy’s far shorter one. Ball and Page provide vivid details of numerous historic events that will be useful to scholars analyzing and recounting the early 21<sup>st</sup> century long after current actors have left the stage.

Unfortunately, none of these books continue through Pelosi’s last two years as Speaker and her relationship with President Biden. These two years—marked by

COVID-19, enhanced security procedures, election denialism, a second Trump impeachment, and an investigation into the January 6 insurrection—are fodder for future Congress-watchers to recount and analyze. All the same, these books comprise different and insightful accounts of a truly remarkable American.

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