

Savvy, cash clinched job for Pelosi November 17th, 2002

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Washington -- By the time Nancy Pelosi's chief opponent appeared on television to announce his candidacy for minority leader, she knew she already had the election won.

From her 14th-floor office in San Francisco's Civic Center, with a phone affixed to her ear, an aide at her side, and a list of names, phone numbers and a sweeping view of the bay before her, the congresswoman was in the midst of a 36-hour telephone frenzy during which she would place more than 100 calls to fellow House members.

It made little difference what Rep. Martin Frost of Texas or the scores of pundits had to say about her liberal pedigree or why a San Francisco Democrat couldn't lead the party. Pelosi hadn't traveled to 90 congressional districts, raised \$8 million or doled out more campaign cash than any other Democrat over the past year for nothing. She hadn't campaigned for nearly three years for the whip's job to end her climb in the party's No. 2 post.

"Everyone said, 'How come you're not on TV?' " Pelosi recalled of the first frantic hours of the leadership race. "I said, 'They're on TV, I'm on the telephone. That's where the votes are.' "

Pelosi's staff had suspected for weeks that Rep. Richard Gephardt would not return as Democratic leader if the party fared poorly in the midterm election. Gephardt confirmed his decision in a private conversation with Pelosi the day after the election, and the telephone blitz began -- starting with lawmakers in the Eastern time zone and methodically moving to the West.

The pitch was straightforward: Congratulate them on their election, inform them Gephardt was not standing for re-election, and ask for their support. Some calls lasted a minute. Some lasted an hour.

The next morning, when Frost spoke into the cameras, Pelosi had confirmed that she had the votes to become the first woman in history to lead either party on Capitol Hill.

"It took us three years to win the whip's race, and 36 hours to win this," said a Pelosi aide.

Pelosi's carefully engineered victory for the top Democratic post combined meticulous organization, aggressive fund raising and good timing. It presents a model for how she will lead her party in the coming years. And it provides an insight into how a Presidio Heights mother of five could become the most powerful woman in the history of Congress.

"She is completely operational in every facet. She has an understanding of policy and politics and leadership. . . . This is a talent that comes once in a generation," said Democratic Rep. George Miller of Martinez, part of a core group of Pelosi supporters who joined her in the phone blitz last week.

"She works harder than probably anyone in the House of Representatives," said Rep. Max Sandlin, D-Texas, another member of "Team Pelosi."

Pelosi kept careful lists and understood her base of support. All 33 California Democrats had pledged their backing, and nearly the entire Congressional Black Caucus, Progressive Caucus and the women of the House were on her side. In addition, Pelosi had raised money and campaigned on behalf of dozens of more moderate members.

Pelosi was careful to tap lieutenants from all parts of the country as well as the political spectrum. Conservative Rep. John Murtha, D-Pa., Texas Reps. Lloyd Doggett and Sandlin, and Rep. Jan Schakowsky, D-Ill., pitched in. Rep. Anna Eshoo made calls in her bathrobe from her Palo Alto home.

The outcome was never in doubt.

Frost left the race after 24 hours, acknowledging publicly that Pelosi had the vote. Rep. Harold Ford of Tennessee jumped in, but by then Pelosi had compiled a list of 111 members -- well over half the Democratic caucus -- who had publicly committed to her. Pelosi ended up with 177 votes to Ford's 29.

It is hard to overstate the long odds against rising to the upper echelon in the Congress. The House is composed of 435 overachievers, each of whom are prominent back home, and all of whom arrive at the Capitol harboring ambitions of rising above the pack.

Pelosi arrived in Washington in 1987 with a head start. Former chair of the California Democratic Party, longtime party volunteer and fund-raiser, and the daughter of former congressman and Baltimore mayor Thomas D'Alesandro Jr., Pelosi walked onto the House floor for the first time already knowing 200 members by name.

Her initial legislative work concerned AIDS, which at the time was ravaging San Francisco and being largely ignored by the federal government. A timely appointment to the House Appropriations Committee -- where all spending bills originate -- and a leading role in the high-profile fight over human rights in China defined Pelosi's national portfolio until the retirement of Rep. Vic Fazio of Sacramento -- the No. 3 ranking House Democrat -- left the leadership without a California voice.

The opportunity was golden. Gephardt was the leader and would become speaker if Democrats picked up the majority. David Bonior of Michigan was the whip, and would move up to majority leader. Pelosi set her eyes on the whip's job and never looked back.

The Democrats would not win the majority, but Bonior decided to run for governor and stepped down as whip, touching off a prolonged race between Pelosi and veteran Maryland lawmaker Steny Hoyer.

Pelosi threw herself at the race, hosting dinners and receptions for her colleagues, and pledging her support in their coming campaigns. Everyone knew the race was about more than the No. 2 position. The winner would be the heir apparent to take over once Gephardt moved on.

"We pretty much figured the winner would be the next leader and the speaker of the House," said Rep. Bob Matsui, D-Sacramento. "She earned her stripes then. That's why there's so little opposition now."

After winning the whip's job, Pelosi stopped campaigning in name only. Until Gephardt's intentions were known, she never asked anyone for their vote.

"People would come up to me and say, 'Count me in.' And I'd say, 'You understand I'm not asking,'" Pelosi recalled. At the same time, she knew exactly where to begin when Gephardt stepped down.

Now Pelosi will turn her political attention toward recapturing the dozen or so seats Democrats needed to regain control of the House.

"Some people are in government, and some people are in politics," said state Sen. John Burton of San Francisco, a Pelosi confidant. "Nancy Pelosi cut her teeth in politics. It's something that is bred in her."

After being sworn into the minority whip's job in January, Pelosi was given a spacious office under the Capitol dome overlooking the Supreme Court. She never put pictures on the wall.

"We didn't plan on being here long enough," Pelosi said, reflecting her assumption that Democrats would take back the House.

In the large suite of offices that will be hers as minority leader, Pelosi says she'll establish a presence, but doesn't want to get too comfortable.

"Politics is about motion," she said the day before her election as minority leader. "You are either going forward, or you are going backward."

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