

With Democrats Divided on War, Pelosi Faces First Test

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WASHINGTON, March 31 - On the morning after the American bombs began dropping on Baghdad, Representative Nancy Pelosi, the House minority leader, met her lieutenants for a strategy session in the Capitol. Ordinarily composed, she confessed to feeling off kilter.

"I am devastated," Ms. Pelosi recalls saying, "by the fact that we are going to war."

The issue at hand was a ticklish one: how to support the troops without heaping praise on President Bush. Moderates wanted a quick resolution backing the military and the president, but some liberals balked. Ms. Pelosi, who represents San Francisco - a city described by a local newspaper as "the most vocally antiwar district in the nation" - was caught in the middle.

For the 63-year-old Ms. Pelosi, who took over leadership of the House Democrats in January, the politics of the war are especially delicate. In her quest to regain Democratic control of the House, she has the difficult task of bringing together a fractured party when Republicans run Congress and the White House. With Democrats sharply divided over foreign policy, the conflict in Iraq is providing the first real test of her leadership.

"Her challenge," said Representative Steny H. Hoyer of Maryland, the assistant Democratic

leader, who is at odds with Ms. Pelosi over the war, "is to project her values and represent her constituents while at the same time leading a diverse caucus, particularly with respect to the war."

That challenge was especially evident in the debate over the resolution supporting the troops. While the Senate voted unanimously in favor of such a measure, Ms. Pelosi could not achieve that kind of consensus in the House. Eleven Democrats voted against and 21 voted present - to protest language praising Mr. Bush as commander in chief and tying the war in Iraq to the war on terrorism.

The vote came in the wee hours of the morning - long after most reporters' deadlines had passed - and only then after Ms. Pelosi spent hours engaging in a kind of shuttle diplomacy between House Republicans, whom she urged unsuccessfully to soften their language, and liberal Democrats, who feared that a vote in favor implied tacit approval of the war. Ms. Pelosi tried to persuade them otherwise, even as she told them they were free to go their own way.

"In the end," said Representative Jan Schakowsky, an Illinois Democrat who voted present, "everyone was really satisfied with the process."

Well, not everyone. Representative Martin Frost of Texas, who briefly challenged Ms. Pelosi for the leader's job last year, sent her a letter while the negotiating was still under way, urging that a resolution be passed promptly.

"I respect the fact that some people were opposed to this; we all understand that," Mr. Frost said in an interview. "But once the battle starts, then you have to put those issues aside."

As the the first woman to lead a party in Congress, Ms. Pelosi, elegant and energetic, has the kind of star quality that many say makes them again excited to be Democrats. Young women come to the Capitol to have their picture taken in front of her office. Donations to the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee have increased by 30 percent, officials there say, since her signature began appearing on the direct mail.

On domestic matters, Ms. Pelosi gets generally high marks from colleagues. She beat the White House to the punch by unveiling a Democratic economic stimulus plan a day before the president. The Democratic alternative to the Republican budget failed by three votes; last year, there was no Democratic alternative.

But some moderates complain that Ms. Pelosi has surrounded herself with a "California kitchen cabinet" that will push the party to the left, a complaint that has become heightened now that she has emerged as a leading Democratic opponent of the war.

"It's not helpful," Representative Charles W. Stenholm of Texas, a leader of the Blue Dog coalition, a moderate group, said, referring to Ms. Pelosi's stance on Iraq.

Asked to rate her overall performance, Mr. Stenholm replied with curt diplomacy: "I would say so far Nancy has done a good job of establishing the type of leadership she intends to bring to the caucus."

That type is vastly different from that of her predecessor, Representative Richard A. Gephardt of Missouri, a centrist who supports the president's action in Iraq.

"Gephardt was often trying to keep a low profile in the hope that he wouldn't offend anybody, because so many of the districts we needed to win were moderate," said Representative Henry A. Waxman, Democrat of California. "She's come out swinging with very clear positions for the Democrats."

But staying focused on domestic policy will be increasingly difficult as the war dominates the news.

"When you are trying to put forth a Democratic message, the war muffles that," said Representative George Miller, a California Democrat and a member of Ms. Pelosi's inner circle.

So Ms. Pelosi has been keeping up a steady stream of news conferences and public appearances, often with Senator Tom Daschle, the Democratic leader. Last week, the two gathered reporters to announce that the Bush economic plan would hurt members of minorities. The week before, they talked about medical malpractice.

Mr. Miller describes Ms. Pelosi as "one of the most complete political people I have ever seen." A mother of five who did not run for elective office until her children were mostly grown, she learned the trade from a master: her father, Thomas J. D'Alesandro Jr., a former congressman and mayor of Baltimore. Some say she inherited his tendency to reward friends and punish enemies, a criticism Ms. Pelosi brushes aside.

"I think what they say is I appoint my friends," Ms. Pelosi said. "I don't consider that a criticism. I want that to be a well-known fact about me."

Ms. Pelosi, who seems to subsist mostly on a diet of chocolate, moves so fast that her staff says they can tell she is coming by the click-click-click of her heels on the Capitol's marble floors. In her office, she keeps a black-and-white photograph of herself as a young girl in a flowing dress, christening a fireboat - the mayor's daughter making the newspapers at 7 years old.

Today, more than half a century later, Ms. Pelosi likes to point out that she occupies the office once held by Thomas P. O'Neill, the former speaker of the House, whose granddaughter works for her. She makes no bones about coveting the speaker's job.

"I don't like that we're not in the majority," she says simply.

But the fight to win back the majority, party strategists say, will inevitably be waged in swing and moderate districts where Ms. Pelosi's views on the war do not hold sway. Already, she has begun to moderate her tone, perhaps mindful of the scolding Mr. Daschle received when he criticized Mr. Bush's diplomacy after the war began.

"I do not have any intention of second-guessing the commander in chief," Ms. Pelosi told

reporters last week at a news conference.

Still, it is difficult for her to conceal her feelings, no matter how much that moderates wish she would. On the night the war began, House Democrats gathered for a long-planned dinner that Ms. Pelosi had been looking forward to. But when Condoleezza Rice, President Bush's national security adviser, called to advise her that the war would soon be under way, Ms. Pelosi said, "the reality that it was happening just took the wind out of my sails."

As to the resolution in support of the troops, Ms. Pelosi regards it as "a bitter pill." Ever the pragmatist, she delivered a speech in opposition to its wording, then voted in favor.