

Victor Shi:

Welcome to Intergenerational Politics, a podcast that makes politics engaging and relevant for all generations. This is Victor Shi a freshman at UCLA and the youngest elected delegate for Joe Biden.

Jill Wine-Banks:

And I'm Jill Wine-Banks, the author of *The Watergate Girl*, an MSNBC legal analyst, and a wearer of Jill's Pins. And today's pin is in special honor of our guest, Susan Page. It is a old fashioned newsboy because I think of Susan, although she's a wonderful author, but I think of her primarily as a newspaper woman. So we're very fortunate to have Susan with us today. We're going to talk a little bit about her second book, *Madam Speaker*, which Victor is holding up a copy of so that you can all see it and go and buy it. *Madam Speaker: Nancy Pelosi and the Lessons of Power*.

Victor Shi:

Anyone who has come across Nancy Pelosi, whether Republican or Democrat will tell you that she is a trailblazer, master negotiator and a powerful force in Washington D.C.. The first woman elected Speaker of the House of Representatives, Nancy broke a glass ceiling and in that role has advanced historic legislation including the Affordable Care Act and the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act guaranteeing equal pay for women. But beyond her legislative acumen and the paths she's paved for future generations of women, there's so much more to know about Nancy Pelosi's life and her approach to her job.

Jill Wine-Banks:

And before we talk to Susan about Nancy Pelosi, I want you all to know more about her. *Madam Speaker* is her second biography. Her first was about former first lady Barbara Bush, and was titled *The Matriarch*, a wonderful book. Susan is as fascinating as the women she has portrayed in her biographies. She is the Washington Bureau Chief for USA Today, where she has covered seven White House administrations, 11 presidential elections, reported from six continents and dozens of foreign countries, and moderated the vice presidential debate between Mike Pence and Kamala Harris.

She appears regularly on television sharing her political insights. In addition, she founded and hosts an award winning video newsmaker series for USA Today called *Capital Download*, and often guest hosted the Diane Rehm Show on National Public Radio, a show that I always loved. She was the first woman elected President of The Gridiron Club, and was the President of the... I'm sorry, I screwed that up. She was the first woman elected President of The Gridiron Club, and it's the oldest association of journalists in Washington which during my time in Washington refused to allow any female members, let alone having a president who was a woman.

She also was President of the White House Correspondents Association in 2000, has served as Chairman of the Robert F. Kennedy Journalism Awards, and has twice been a juror for the Pulitzer Prizes. And she has won many awards for her work, including the Gerald R. Ford prize for Distinguished Reporting on the Presidency, and the Sigma Delta Chi Distinguished Service Award for Washington Correspondence.

She's a graduate of Northwestern and of Columbia. I live near Northwestern, and I'm a graduate of Columbia, but she's of the journalism school. I was of the law school because I took the law boards instead of the Graduate Record Exams. And as I was graduating, I wanted to go to Columbia but it had to be the law school because that's the test I took. There's a lot to learn about Speaker Pelosi and about Susan, so thank you for joining us today.

This transcript was exported on May 12, 2021 - view latest version [here](#).

Susan Page:

Hey, Jill, it's so great to be with you. I'm honored to be here on your podcast.

Victor Shi:

Yeah.

Jill Wine-Banks:

Thank you.

Victor Shi:

We are so looking forward to this. And I'd like to start off with your book about Speaker Pelosi. I've always been a huge fan about biographies and kind of how they're structured, and I want to ask you first, what led you to pick Speaker Pelosi as your subject for the book?

Susan Page:

You know for both the books I did I had a couple things in mind. I wanted to choose someone who made a difference, who was consequential, who had had an impact on our country. And I wanted to choose someone who people didn't really understand, maybe someone who had been underestimated or misunderstood during their time in the public eye. And I thought she fit both those criteria. In fact, both these women who I've written biographies of turned out to be fascinating and complicated. I also, there was maybe a third thing I was looking for, someone who was a little controversial, someone who had both fans and critics. And that is certainly the case when you talk about Nancy Pelosi.

Victor Shi:

Oh, definitely. And you know she cooperated with her writing. You interviewed her I think 10 times you said, and I'm wondering, what was that first interview like with her? Because you were with the USA Today and I'm assuming that you have interviewed her before, but what was that first sit down interview like when you approached her and said, "I'm writing this book, talk to me"? Oh, hold on, you might be on mute. Okay, there we go.

Susan Page:

All set?

Victor Shi:

Yeah.

Jill Wine-Banks:

You're back.

Susan Page:

I had interviewed Nancy Pelosi over the years as a reporter for USA Today. And the first book, when I signed a contract to write this biography, I had not made any arrangements with her about whether she would talk to me. And that sounds really stupid, but here was my reasoning. My reasoning was I didn't want to feel like it was up to her whether I wrote this book. I didn't want her to feel like if she agreed to

cooperate she would have some say over what I wrote because I wanted to do a work of journalism, not an authorized biography.

So she agreed to one interview, and I go in to see her, and she offers me a Dove bar. She's a big chocoholic so she offered me this ice cream bar encased in chocolate. And I take a bite of it, and I shatter little pieces of chocolate all over her carpet, all this pristine off cream colored carpet in the Speaker's office. So there I am with the Speaker of the House, desperately trying to pick up little melting pieces of chocolate off her carpet. I was sure she would never invite me back. Now, she did let me come back and interview her. I interviewed her as you said a total of 10 times, but I can tell you, she never again offered me any food.

Victor Shi:

That's a wonderful story.

Jill Wine-Banks:

A great story.

Victor Shi:

Yeah. And definitely a great first impression. I think that if I were in that situation I would not know what to do, especially with Speaker Pelosi, but I mean, what kind of relationship did you come to develop with her as the interviews went on? Did she get a little bit more relaxed with you? How did those nine other interviews go?

Susan Page:

So she's a tough interview. Nancy Pelosi is guarded and she's very disciplined. You know from doing this podcast she really prefer people who are undisciplined and will answer whatever question you ask. She's not like that. She's not embarrassed to say the same thing she has said 100 times before if you ask her a question. So she is a tough interview. But by the time we got to the end of this process, she was more relaxed, she was more open than she was at the beginning.

And one thing I would say that I really admire about Nancy Pelosi, she never put a single thing off the record. She didn't always tell me every single thing she was thinking about whatever I was asking about, but she never put anything off the record. She continued to sit down with me to talk even though she knew I was asking questions, some questions that she wanted to answer, but also some questions that she didn't want to answer.

Jill Wine-Banks:

Yeah.

Victor Shi:

Yeah. From watching public Speaker Pelosi on TV, I always imagined her to be quite intense yet almost humorous. Would you say that was kind of what it was like in one-on-one interviews with her?

Susan Page:

So she's always intense, I think. I think that's just her persona. She's powerful. She's comfortable with power. She likes power. She exudes power. She tends to be an intense person. I wouldn't say she's

humorless. It's not that she cracks jokes. I don't know that I've ever seen her crack a joke, but she is very devoted to her five children. She didn't get into politics until the youngest child was a senior in high school. She adores her nine grandchildren. She once when she was 76 years old she took two of her grandsons to a Metallica concert. That is maybe a side of Nancy Pelosi you haven't seen.

Jill Wine-Banks:

Yeah.

Victor Shi:

Definitely not. No. And you mentioned that you, so you interviewed First Lady Barbara Bush, and that was your first biography book. Can you kind of describe the comparison between interviewing First Lady Barbara Bush, and then also Speaker Pelosi and kind of what you learned in between those two processes of writing that book?

Susan Page:

They were totally different, and they were opposite challenges in doing biographies. With Barbara Bush, if you ask her any question she would answer it, even if it was embarrassing to her or... And she was funny and caustic. But the challenge in doing the Barbara Bush biography was exploring the ways in which she had made a difference in policy when her husband was President and when her son was President, because she was influential on policy but that was not something she'd talk about. Any personal question she was fine answering. So that was the challenge with her.

The challenge was the reverse with Nancy Pelosi. Nancy Pelosi would talk about the Affordable Care Act or the details of policy or legislative debate from morning, noon and night, but ask her something personal and she does not want to respond. So the challenge with her was exploring kind of her more personal side.

Victor Shi:

At the very beginning of your book you mentioned this story of you asking her if you can get a copy of her transcripts, and she immediately was like, "No." And it was like I think at that moment as the reader we realized that she's probably a little bit off limits in terms of her personal life. But you still, you also mentioned that you brought in drawings and different artifacts into each interview, which I guess you were trying to pull in the personal side of Speaker Pelosi, and you mentioned that you brought in one of her mother's drawings that she submitted to the US Patent Office for a device that she had invented for steam facials. What was her reaction to seeing some of those drawings and other memorabilia because it was so personal?

Susan Page:

I think it definitely helped our relationship. I think she thought it was interesting. I think it also showed her that I was trying to be very serious about exploring her life in a serious way. These drawings from the Patent Office, quite elaborate, very scientific looking for this device that her mother had invented. And in fact, last year, one of my sons went on eBay and found one of these machines that her mother had made. It has a little tag on that says, "Nancy D'Alesandro Beauty by Vapor," and it comes with an electric cord. And you pour precious oils or as it might happen water into this aluminum tube, plug it in, it creates steam that comes up through this hole. And Nancy D'Alesandro's promise to buyers was it would give you beautiful youthful skin.

So Nancy Pelosi had seen her mother's machine, but I don't think she had seen the patent that her mother had submitted for it. So that was new. And I found some other things that she hadn't seen before. Jack Murtha for instance, the Congressman from the Pittsburgh area who was a big, important ally of Nancy Pelosi when she got to Congress and in the early days of her trying to get to the leadership. He had some papers that... He's passed away now, but he had some papers that he had put in the archives at the University of Pittsburgh, and I don't think anybody had ever gone through them. And in them were these handwritten notes about what he thought of Nancy Pelosi. And I know that she had never seen those before because I don't think anyone had ever found these papers before. And she was very, I think she was very touched by those, and she asked to keep a copy of them.

Jill Wine-Banks:

Aw. That is very nice. It's I want to pursue a little more about writing a biography because I wrote a memoir, but I started with my memories and then I fact checked them online and I interviewed some people involved. But to me, that seems a lot easier than trying to write a biography, particularly a biography about a living person who is so influential and so controversial, and who probably overlaps in your other job as a bureau chief for a newspaper. So can you talk a little bit about the process of how you start to write a biography?

Susan Page:

So and I enjoyed your book very much, *The Watergate Girl*. I'm glad that you wrote that. I think that when people have been at big events and played a part in them, it's so important for them to put it down on paper for history. So thank you for writing. Thank you for writing that book.

Jill Wine-Banks:

And thank you for writing a little blurb for us.

Susan Page:

Yes, I did. So I did, I was honored to write a blurb for it.

Jill Wine-Banks:

I remember you so well from the email you sent which was, "I'm trapped at an airport. You're saving me." So that was the best.

Susan Page:

So true. So what I did was I don't know what the right way is to write a biography, but I can tell you the way that I did it, which was I started out by making a list of 100 people I wanted to interview, and then I interviewed the oldest people first. Because realities of life-

Jill Wine-Banks:

Yes.

Susan Page:

People get older, they get more forgetful, sometimes they pass away. So I interviewed by birthdate to start with for the people that I really wanted to talk to. So the first two people I was really focused on getting interviews with. One was John Burton, who was this legendary California political figure who had

been very important in Nancy Pelosi's early day. John Burton's brother, Phil, was head of the Burton political machine. And he was quite elderly and not in good health, so one of the first things I did was go to San Francisco to interview him.

And then one of the other people I wanted to interview right away was Harry Reid, who of course served as Senate leader when Pelosi was serving as House Leader for the Democrats. And Harry Reid had retired and was suffering from pancreatic cancer. And so one of the early trips I made was to Las Vegas to interview him. And I am happy to report that both these men are still alive and kicking.

Jill Wine-Banks:

Yes.

Susan Page:

So the urgency I felt to talk to them first turned to be not warranted, but that was the theory I had. I tried to interview, I tried to arrange interviews with her of course, but also with anybody else who had been her friend or her foe or had encounters with her that I thought would be important.

Jill Wine-Banks:

Mm-hmm (affirmative). And did you talk to her family?

Susan Page:

I talked to the members of their family who had talked to me. Paul Pelosi, her husband, talked to me. I was grateful for that. He does very few interviews. I don't think he had done an interview since 2007 with a reporter. So that was good. I talked to Christine Pelosi who has her politically-minded daughter. Do you know Christine? You're nodding.

Jill Wine-Banks:

I do know Christine and her daughter, Nancy's granddaughter.

Susan Page:

Yeah, Bella.

Jill Wine-Banks:

Bella is quite a character. She's wonderful.

Susan Page:

Yes. Well, there are a lot of pictures of Nancy Pelosi with Bella her granddaughter, so obviously an important figure in their lives. Do you think Christine will run for her Mother's seat if her brother retires?

Jill Wine-Banks:

Oh, my gosh, I don't know, but now you've put it in my head. I'm going to have to ask her and find out.

Susan Page:

Let me know what she tells you.

Jill Wine-Banks:

Okay, I certainly will if she doesn't say it confidentially. But is it easier to write a biography the second time? Did you learn things in writing about Barbara bush that in terms of process and procedure that helped you in doing the second one?

Susan Page:

One thing that was helpful was the first time I wasn't 100% sure I could do it. And having done it once, the second time I knew I could do it. That was very helpful just in terms of giving me confidence. Also, one thing I discovered in doing the first book was that after I had spent a year interviewing everyone I could think of who knew Barbara Bush, and spending time with Barbara Bush herself, I began to trust myself as an authority. When you're a newspaper reporter, you don't say something is true, you say, this expert says this is true. And it took me a long time to realize that at that point no one knew more about Barbara Bush than I did, and so I might as well trust myself and draw my own conclusions about who she was and why she mattered and what she did. And I started out with that understanding about Nancy Pelosi, that if I did enough research I would be the authority on Nancy Pelosi and be able to write with confidence about her life.

Jill Wine-Banks:

Was there anyone who refused to talk to you?

Susan Page:

Yes. Unfortunately, in a rare oversight, the Founders did not give reporters subpoena power. Maybe as a lawyer you can explain this to me, but it means that people can talk to you or not talk to you, it's up to them. And I understand that, I don't blame anybody who didn't want to talk to me, and I'm very appreciative to the people who did talk to me.

Jill Wine-Banks:

Yeah, I encountered that. I wanted to portray Rosemary Woods as a real person, and I called people who knew her because I wanted to know where did she shop? Who were her friends? What was she like outside the office? And the people who would talk to me knew nothing. Mostly they were men. So I said, "What did her apartment look like?" And they'd go on, "Oh, I really never noticed." And to people who worked for her in the White House, they would hang up on me. And Bob Woodward said, "Stop calling. You have to knock on the door. It's harder to slam the door in your face." So I flew to Washington, knocked on a door and it was slammed in my face. So I had severe problems there. But was the fact that you are a journalist and that your main job means keeping good relations with newsmakers, did that impact how you went about writing about Nancy, not so much in gathering the information but how you would present it?

Susan Page:

It did not. I'm pretty elderly now. I'm toward the... And so therefore, I am not afraid about what people are going to do to me. It's different than when you're a 25-year-old reporter desperately trying to develop sources. From the beginning, Nancy Pelosi and everyone I spoke to understood I was doing to report out her life and her influence, the good and the bad. The book does not say Nancy Pelosi is perfect, she's not perfect. It says she was important, and that's the point of the book. So I approached it just exactly in the way I would have approached writing a new story.

Victor Shi:

We'll talk about the person who you so brilliantly portrayed in your book a little bit later, but I just first want to ask you about you and your career, because as I'm listening to you kind of talk about it I think it's so important for our audience get to know you as well, because you have such an interesting life. And now we mentioned at the outset that you've got your undergrad and your master's degree in journalism. For all of our young listeners, who many of them who I know and they want to become journalists, did you always know you wanted to become a journalist? What was that process like for you to kind of get that first kind of passion for journalism?

Susan Page:

When I was in high school there were two things I really loved. And when I was a senior in high school I had to decide which to do, because one was being a journalist, which would take me in one direction. The other, you can guess the other it's so obvious, it was being an oboist. I realize it sounds ridiculous now, but I was a very serious oboe player. I played the oboe since I was-

Victor Shi:

Wow.

Susan Page:

In the third grade. I went to music camp in the summers. I played in the state orchestra. I mean, and I love the oboe, and I do love the oboe even today, although I no longer play it. But you cannot go to one school and double major in oboe and journalism. That school does not exist. And you have to make a choice. It's like you do one or the other. And this was honestly an early and difficult decision I made. But once I decided that journalism was the better bet, and believe me, no regrets now. Then it was all I wanted to do. I don't recommend just majoring in journalism to people who want to be journalists, but the fact is, there was nothing else I wanted to do, so that's what I majored in.

Victor Shi:

And what was your first job as a journalist, like a first official job?

Susan Page:

So I had some internships when I was in college, but my first job after I graduated from Columbia was at Newsday, the newspaper on Long Island, where I was the number two reporter for the town of Smithtown. And I thought it was the best job in the world. No one covered Smithtown with more energy or focus than I did in that first job. And then I got promoted to Islip, which was a better beat because it was a bigger town. And I became the number one reporter on Islip, instead of the number two reporter on Smithtown. And then I became a national correspondent for Newsday, moved to Washington for Newsday, and then moved to USA Today.

Victor Shi:

I think that path of starting at the small print publication and then going all the way up is something that I'm not sure we quite see enough today, but it's so interesting to hear you talk about that. And now you're obviously at USA Today, which is ranked first in circulation, and what is it like to kind of have had that journey and now as the Washington Bureau Chief, the first ranked circulation newspaper?



Susan Page:

When I worked for Newsday and was covering Smithtown, it was the number one circulation in Smithtown. It was important to the people I was writing about. And it's not so different. When I covered the Smithtown City Council, I had to use the same skills I then used covering the White House. In fact, that's where I learned the skills that you use in covering government and covering its impact on people. And you also, I think, working for a smaller publication, you see the impact your stories can have on people's lives. It makes you, I think, much more careful about being accurate, because you can hurt people in an unfair way if you're inaccurate. But it also shows you kind of the power of journalism to make a difference. So I am so grateful for the training I got at Newsday. And it's really, it sounds more prestigious to cover the White House for USA Today, but I can tell you it is essentially the same job as covering City Council for Smithtown.

Victor Shi:

I mean, obviously starting there provided you with so many skills and experiences, and that brought you to moderating the vice presidential debate in 2020 between Mike Pence and Kamala Harris. And for those of us watching that was kind of in hindsight right now, I mean, that was just such a roller coaster moment throughout that election process. And when you first got approached to moderate the vice presidential debate, what was your first thought, and what was that like to actually be in that moment? During COVID, there was this huge kind of debacle between whether there should be kind of plexiglass dividers, and how they should set up the debate. What was that process like for you?

Susan Page:

It was such a hoot. It was so much fun. I was deeply honored and also just so excited. It was like a wonderful... It was funny, Frank Fahrenkopf, the former Republican chairman who is a member of the debate commission, he's the one who called me and said, "Would you like to moderate the vice presidents debate?" And I said, "Wow, yes." I didn't have to think about that. And it was especially funny because a couple years earlier, he and I had had lunch to talk about whatever debate was going on then, and he said, "It's too bad you could never moderate a debate because it has to be someone from TV." The fact is they never had a single moderator be someone who was not a TV journalist. So I was kind of stoked about that too.

It was I think these debates are so important. These candidates do not have to debate. Nothing makes them debate. It's really tradition that pushes them to participate even if they don't want to. And it's an occasion when the two candidates for president or for vice president are next to each other on stage, asking questions not necessarily from a friendly journalist, I just think they're so important. And that first presidential debate was such a mess. The one with Chris Wallace, not Chris Wallace's fight fault that Donald Trump blew up that first debate. So the vice presidential debate was the second debate. And I did have some real conversations with Chris about how to handle things because the first one had been so difficult.

Jill Wine-Banks:

And what was his advice?

Victor Shi:

Yeah.

Susan Page:

Well, he did not have a plan for what he should have done. He thought he had done what he could, and it was just an impossible situation. My debate had its problems, its ups and downs, but I didn't have Donald Trump in it. And Mike Pence was pretty aggressive, more aggressive than I had expected him to be in the debate, but it still was a much easier task than Chris Wallace had. And I got to tell you, the only thing anyone remembers from my debate is the fly.

Jill Wine-Banks:

Yes.

Victor Shi:

Yes. Did you notice it while you were moderating?

Susan Page:

I couldn't see it. I didn't see the fly. He obviously he didn't see it because it was on his head. I understand that Kamala Harris did see it and decided she wouldn't say anything. So we come off, the debate is over, we go offstage, Pence goes off stage, I follow him a few minutes later, his kids come up, they had been in the audience. And that was when he learned that this big fly had landed on his head to everyone's amusement. He and I were both completely unaware of that.

Victor Shi:

Wow.

Jill Wine-Banks:

Gosh.

Victor Shi:

The Biden campaign-

Jill Wine-Banks:

I ended up going out to buy a pin that was a fly, because how could you not wear a fly? Anyway, let's go back to your book about Speaker Pelosi and some of your insights. You talk a lot about her upbringing. Her father was a Congressman and then the mayor of Baltimore. Her mother was also very active in politics. So it's sort of she was born into a political family. You describe them as the Kennedys of the West, and that they were a big influence on her. Can you talk a little bit more about that?

Susan Page:

Right, the Kennedys of Baltimore where they were from.

Jill Wine-Banks:

Right, the Kennedys of Baltimore.

Susan Page:

Yes. Definitely born into political royalty, politics in her DNA, politics morning, noon, and night, constituents constantly lining up outside their house in Little Italy seeking help on things that constituents needed help on. Her mother kept what she called a favor file, which was exactly what it sounds like. People would come in and ask for help to get housing or to get a son out of jail or to deal with an immigration problem. And her mother would write on a card what it was that they needed. She would undertake efforts to address whatever problem was they had.

Often, her daughter, who was known as Little Nancy, her mother was called Big Nancy. Little Nancy would sit next to her mother, and take notes about what these people were saying. And of course, when election time came around, the people who had gotten favors were expected to turn out to vote, even to pass up pamphlets to be helpful. And if someone came along later and needed some other favor that a previous favor seeker could provide, that connection would also be made. So this is the essence of politics. This is the essence of what has made Nancy Pelosi such an effective speaker.

Jill Wine-Banks:

Interesting to see that. You also write that Nancy said of her mother, and I'm quoting from your book, "She was constrained not by a lack of imagination, but by the limits of opportunity for women in her day. I often think she was born 50 years too soon." And she went on to say that, "The truth is that my father and the times held her back." Can you talk a little more about that, because that really struck me as something that reflects my mother's generation as well?

Susan Page:

I think a common experience for a lot of women of that generation. She was smart and ambitious, and restless and an entrepreneur. She was a risk taker. She loved the ponies. She was a regular at Pimlico and sometimes was in debt to the bookies. Who could not love this woman?

Jill Wine-Banks:

Yes.

Susan Page:

And a fierce partisan. So when her husband was no longer Mayor, had retired as mayor, actually had been defeated in his bid for a fourth term, the D'Alesandros continued to live in the house in Little Italy where Little Nancy had grown up. And the White House called in 1984, because President Reagan was coming to Little Italy to unveil a statue of Christopher Columbus, and they wanted to know if the D'Alesandros wanted to be Reagan's guest at this event. Now, this is obviously, the White House thinks this is a huge plum, who would not want to be the guest of the President for this big event?

And Nancy Pelosi's mother said to the White House, "After all the things that Ronald Reagan has done to poor people in this country, you better not even bring him close to us." And the White House was so concerned by the fierceness of her response that a White House aide actually called the D'Alesandros' son, who had himself served a term as mayor, to ask if she posed a physical threat to the President.

Jill Wine-Banks:

Oh, that's a great story. And there are a lot of good stories about the young Nancy, Little Nancy. And she ultimately followed a pretty traditional path. She got married at 23, raised a large family and was a volunteer in politics in her early 30s. And it wasn't until 20 years after that, after her father's death that

she ran for Congress. And I'm wondering if there is a connection between her father's death and her running. And I ask that particularly because you also mentioned and you've mentioned Congressman Burton, but his wife and Lindy Boggs were two women who became Members of Congress after their husbands had passed away. And did Burton and Boggs play a role as well as her father?

Susan Page:

So I don't think it was the passing away of her father, the illness of her father at the time of the campaign that made a difference. I think what made a difference, and this is something we see a lot with women of her generation who get into politics. She didn't think she could get into politics until another woman told her to do it, encouraged her to do it. And in this case, it was Sala Burton, who as you said was the widow of Phil Burton, leader of a very well known politician. There's a wonderful book about him called A Rage for Justice by John Jacobs. It is a great political biography.

Sala Burton succeeded her husband as the Congresswoman from San Francisco, and she was then dying of cancer. And she called Nancy Pelosi into her hospital room and said, "I think you should run for my seat, and if you do, I will endorse you," which was a huge prize because Nancy Pelosi had never run for anything before. It was San Francisco, you knew there was going to be a lot of people running for the seat. This was an important endorsement. Nancy Pelosi then four of her children were in college or out working. Her youngest daughter was a senior in high school.

And she went back and asked her daughter Alexandra if it would be okay with Alexandra if she ran for this office, because if she won she would be spending time in Washington, not with Alexandra. And Alexandra said, "Mom, get a life." It's the scorn of our children. We're less important to them perhaps than we think we are. And with that, Nancy Pelosi ran. Narrowly won that first special election and has never lost another election.

Jill Wine-Banks:

Wow. Now because we mentioned Lindy Boggs, who did take over also when her husband was killed in a plane crash. And it seems to me that back then, that was not an uncommon... It's interesting that it took a woman to ask Nancy or a woman taking over for the husband, and then getting... Of course, Lindy became quite powerful and was elected in her own right, but I wonder if that was a more common way for women to enter politics back then?

Susan Page:

It absolutely was. And sometimes women served only the remainder of their husband's term after he died, and sometimes they ended up with big political careers of their own as Lindy Boggs did. Lindy Boggs, actually an important mentor for Nancy Pelosi even before she was in Congress. When she was a political organizer in California politics, she got a big job on a committee at a convention, and she went to Lindy Boggs who was her friend and said, "I think I'll give up this other political job because I'm getting this new political job." And Lindy Boggs said, "No man would ever do that. Don't give up anything." Lindy Boggs told her, "Nancy know thy power." And when Pelosi wrote her memoir, she titled it Know Your Power, a hat tip to Lindy Boggs.

Jill Wine-Banks:

I just have to mention, Lindy Boggs was the Chair of the Convention in 1976, and I was the counsel to the Convention. So I got to meet her and work with her and several others on ERA, which was a big issue

back then. She was a phenomena. She really was fabulous. But let's talk a little more about sexism. And I think Victor has some questions on that.

Victor Shi:

Yeah, I mean, your book describes sexism as this big force that loomed large when Speaker Pelosi first got involved in politics. And interestingly enough, you wrote that Speaker Pelosi avoided that topic of sexism when she was running for office. Can you explain that for our audience and why that was?

Susan Page:

Pelosi complained about sexism only once in one race, and that was the only race she ever lost. It was a bid to become Democratic Chair, National Democratic Chair after the Walter Mondale debacle in 1984. Walter Mondale, who of course just passed away, we honor his memory. Pelosi ran for that job, and she thought she was the best, she thought she was clearly the best candidate. She was from the West where the party needed to go. She had a proven record in California as the political organizer. And she lost the race that big labor had a different candidate, Paul Kirk Jr. and spread all these sexist slurs about Pelosi, calling her an airhead, and a female airhead, and a dilettante, all things that Nancy Pelosi was not.

And in the after that race, she complained kind of bitterly that they had done this, that they had waged this sexist campaign. But after that, she never complained about it again. And I think that she just decided there was no point in complaining about it. She would just plow ahead. The fact is, Nancy Pelosi has one gear and that is full speed ahead. And I think she then just put on blinders and ignored some of the sexism that she faced during the rest of her political career, and faces today. Nancy Pelosi is endlessly attacked by Republicans, some of them for ideological reasons, but a lot of it is just misogyny. And that continues to be a factor today.

Victor Shi:

You describe Nancy as wanting more influence as a Member of Congress. And obviously, you describe her as wanting to go just full plow ahead. Did she always have her eyes set on that speaker role?

Susan Page:

She says no, but she was almost immediately seen as a contender. And Chuck Schumer... So there was a Tuesday night dinner group of some young Members of Congress, some members, young Members of the House, and she joined this dinner group when she arrived in Congress in 1987. There was Barbara Boxer, there was Chuck Schumer, Dick Durbin, any number of people who went on to have bigger political careers. And when I interviewed Chuck Schumer for the book, he said that George Miller, who was a California Congressman who first brought Nancy Pelosi to this dinner, said to him, "Oh, you're going to meet Nancy Pelosi tonight. She's a future speaker."

Jill Wine-Banks:

Wow.

Susan Page:

So there were those who saw these skills in her, but it took a while, and it took her getting unhappy with the Democratic leadership in place for her to then challenge the old boy network and get her foot on the ladder.

Jill Wine-Banks:

So from another perspective, you write wonderfully about how after Dick Gephardt resigned as Minority Leader in the House to run in the 2004 presidential primaries, Speaker Pelosi was elected to replace him. Well, now Speaker Pelosi was elected to replace him, making her the first woman to lead the Democratic Party in the House. Was that a powerful experience for her? Did that open the doors for more to come?

Susan Page:

Yeah, the first woman to be leader of Democrats in the House, the first woman to lead either party in either chamber. It was really a grabber, and she continues to be the only woman who has been the leader of either party in either chamber. It was a very powerful... It was a big step. And it wasn't that long ago, isn't it remarkable that... And when she went to the first White House meeting as after she was elected to the leadership, the first time she had been included in that traditional meeting between the President and the Congressional leaders.

And she had this experience which sounds mystical, she describes it as concrete where she suddenly felt crowded in her chair by suffragette leaders, that she felt they were all around her and with her, she was representing them. And that after a minute or two, that feeling went away, is that interesting?

Jill Wine-Banks:

That is very interesting. Another part of your book, you paint a very vivid picture of Nancy Pelosi as a leader and how she wields her power. You describe her as an iron fist in a Gucci glove. And it seems like with her political background, but I wonder if her style as Speaker came to her naturally, whether it was something she had to force herself to learn, whether she watched it in her father and her mother and it just was natural? What do you think?

Susan Page:

When I was writing this book... This is a slightly circular answer. But when I signed the contract for the book, the title of the book was Nancy Pelosi and the Arc of Power. And then I got about halfway through it and I changed it to Nancy Pelosi and the Tests of Power. But by the end of it, I made it Nancy Pelosi and the Lessons of Power, because she's so reflects the lessons she learned from the day she was born into that political household in Baltimore. I'm sure her leadership style has evolved some over the years, but I think it's pretty natural to her. I think this is who Nancy Pelosi is. I think this is the skills and the strengths and the weaknesses that she brings to her job.

The phrase iron fist in a Gucci glove, which I love and used in the book was actually coined by John Bresnahan, who was then working for Politico. He used it in a profile of her about a decade ago. And that's the combination that has made her able to be elected leader of House Democrats, stay in power longer than anybody since Sam Rayburn, and wield power, because she can have a Gucci glove, she can understand where members are coming from, figure out what motivates them, how to bring them along. But when she needs it, she has an iron fist.

Victor Shi:

I mean, it's such a powerful book also for young people to kind of learn how someone as influential as Speaker Pelosi is able to wield that power when it matters. And one of the most, I guess, vivid stories that you tell in the book about her wielding power is her first few months in office and she didn't really

receive the backing of a lot of people. And in 2009, she hovered at just over 10% approval rating, and I guess, did the public's perception of Speaker Pelosi ever affect how she approached her job and how she approached decision makings?

Susan Page:

She's always been controversial. She's never had a great approval rating. She's very popular among partisan Democrats, but she is really vilified by Republicans. I don't think that has prompted her to change the way she does business. Here's the fact, Nancy Pelosi is terrible at the things we can all see, at big speeches, at impromptu exchanges, at news conferences. And Nancy Pelosi is fantastic, unsurpassed at the things we don't see, like negotiations in a closed room or convincing a single crucial Member of Congress to cast a vote that he or she does not want to cast. So it is not surprising that her public perception has often been pretty toxic, because her strength is really not with the larger American public, it's with the 225 members, Democratic Members of the House.

Victor Shi:

So throughout the book you underscore how masterful Speaker Pelosi is in specifically counting the votes or whipping the votes. And you share the Affordable Care Act and other stories. Is there an example that you think stands out about her being able to whip the votes that you can share with our audience? And also kind of the importance of that skill and how well she's able to do it compared to other speakers, and what about that skill makes her effective?

Susan Page:

Here's an example of how she's skilled was that the Affordable Care Act passed very narrowly in the House. Passage was not assured. Joe Donnelly was a Member of the House from Indiana, they wanted his vote. He had voted against the Affordable Care Act the first time around. President Obama calls Congressman Donnelly into the Oval Office and says, "I need you to do this for me." This did not persuade Joe Donnelly that he was going to vote for it. He wasn't going to do it for Obama.

Nancy Pelosi did something different. She didn't lobby Donnelly herself. She called father Theodore Hesburgh, who was the head of Notre Dame where Joe Donnelly had gone to school. Father Hesburgh was like a father to him. And Professor Hesburgh called Donnelly and said, "I'm not going to tell you what to do. I know that you're going to do the right thing." And Joe Donnelly decided, "Well, the right thing, I guess the right thing is to vote for this."

Jill Wine-Banks:

Wow.

Susan Page:

And he voted for it.

Jill Wine-Banks:

That is good strategy on her part, that's for sure. When the Democrats lost seats in the midterms in 2010, Nancy became the minority leader. How did she handle her loss of power, because that's a much less influential position than being Speaker.

Susan Page:

And she was partly responsible, right? If you're the leader, you prosper when times are good, but you're held responsible, you're blamed when times are bad. She seriously thought about stepping down as she was quite discouraged. She thought that President Obama could have done more to protect House Democrats in that midterm election. I think other even, fans of President Obama would agree with that assessment. She went back to California to think about what to do. And word got around, it wasn't widely known, but among some of her key allies, words got around that she was seriously thinking about stepping down.

And some of them began to call her. Richard Trumka, the head of the AFL-CIO heard that she was thinking about this. He told me that he called her and said, "Nobody can do what you can do. It's important that you not step down." And others gave her the same message. And that she then went around and consulted with almost every Democrat in the House about whether they wanted her to step down. And in the end, perhaps in the end she decided to stay. And well, gaining control of the House of course took a long time, it took eight years before Democrats would be back in control again. That is a long time to be in the minority.

Jill Wine-Banks:

And how did she approach working with the new speakers in the time as Minority Leader?

Susan Page:

The speakers that she worked with thought that she was tough. She was aiming to win elections. I mean, John Bainer, who was the Speaker who succeeded her as Speaker, he served as Speaker between her two stints as Speaker, said that even when he wanted to moderate his rhetoric, she never did. And Newt Gingrich, she had a terrible relationship with Newt Gingrich. She's a partisan figure, she wanted to regain control. She wasn't a Bob Michael who maybe would be apparently happy in the minority and willing to be cooperative in it. That's not the era we're in either. We're in a different kind of era these days. So I think her number one focus when she was in the minority was, number one, prevent bad things from happening, bad things in her view, things Republicans might try to do. And number two, get power back.

Jill Wine-Banks:

Interesting. So let's talk about something that is endlessly fascinating, and that is her relationship with Donald Trump. I mean, news photos and stories show, in my mind anyway, Speaker Pelosi and Trump as not getting along at all. How did the Speaker see it from her perspective, and also from your perspective as a journalist and as her biographer? Was that public perception, is my public perception anyway, a valid one?

Susan Page:

Nancy Pelosi had a pretty negative view of Donald Trump from the start. I mean, she had been thinking about and making plans to step down in 2016 after Hillary Clinton was inaugurated, assuming Hillary Clinton would be inaugurated as so many of us did assume. It was only when on election night in 2016 when she realized that Trump was being elected president that she decided to stick around and stand up to him. She saw him as she didn't like his attitude toward women. She didn't like the Access Hollywood tape. She didn't like his rhetoric on immigration, immigration being a very important issue to her, one that it affected her family, her grandparents had immigrated from Italy. So she was determined to prevent Trump from doing bad things and to get power back to stand up to him.



Now, Trump's attitude, Trump had a slightly different attitude toward Pelosi. I think Trump saw Pelosi as someone as the fellow dealmaker and maybe someone he could do business with. And in fact, I interviewed Trump for USA Today in the fall of 2018, just a few weeks before the midterm elections in 2018. And he was in fact not that concerned about Democrats regaining control, making Pelosi Speaker, because thought they... And he said, "In some ways, they'll be more interested in getting things done than the Republicans are." And there were aides to him, including Steve Bannon, who were telling him, "This will be catastrophic for you if Democrats win control of the House." Steve Bannon told me he thought Pelosi was determined to impeach Trump from the start, and then she would be able to do it. That was not Trump's view, although of course as it turned out, it was not a good thing for Donald Trump when Nancy Pelosi became Speaker of the House.

Jill Wine-Banks:

He clearly misperceived that. There's also been some discussion, and you talk about this in the book about Speaker Pelosi being criticized by Republicans and some Democrats, as not being willing to work with Trump. Of course, I see it as Trump wasn't willing to work with anything the Democrats wanted. But did she see this... And of course, there's the famous thing at the State of the Union, where she tore up his speech as the way of maybe communicating with him and her famous clap. Did she see this as a way to communicate with him? Did she see herself as not working with him, or as doing the best anybody could possibly do? Because she was a dealmaker.

Susan Page:

I think she lost her temper at the 2020 State of the Union. She told me that she was up there, sitting behind Trump. When the President arrived, he gave her a text of the State of the Union, which is customary. She was reading through it, she saw some things she thought was wrong, untrue, and she wanted to just make a little mark on the paper so she could come back to that. And she couldn't find a pen because of course, when you're the Speaker of the House, you do not take your purse up with you to the day on the State of the Union. And there's a little drawer there in front of her, so she opens the drawer. There's nothing in the drawer, there's no pen.

So she made a tiny tear in the margin of the paper just so she could find this thing that she wanted to refer back to. And then she found another thing she thought was untrue, and made another tiny tear. And then she found something else she thought was untrue, and she made another tiny tear. And she told me that she didn't really decide to tear it up until the very end. And by the end of it, she was steaming for one thing because of the honor the Presidential Honor that Trump had awarded to Rush Limbaugh at the State of the Union address. She thought that is an inappropriate thing to do at that event. So she's pretty mad.

She said, "I decided if he was going to shred the truth, I was going to shred his speech." So she stands up. I've never seen anything like this in all my years in Washington, tears the speech in half four times, she had to do a few pages at a time because it was so thick, four times tearing it in half, tossing it with contempt, clear contempt onto the desk. Meanwhile, Mike Pence is standing next to her clapping for the President pretending he doesn't see a thing.

Jill Wine-Banks:

It is a memorable scene. One last question about this, which is how is she dealing with the divisions within the Democratic Party and the total polarization of Democrats and Republicans and dealing with Republicans right now, particularly after the January 6th insurrection?

Susan Page:

Yeah. She doesn't have much relationship with Republicans. I think it is fair Nancy Pelosi didn't create our polarization, but she hasn't done much to ameliorate it either. She is a pretty fierce partisan who is comfortable navigating this current political landscape. And that's why we have Democrats choosing things like reconciliation to get the big proposals through. It's tough. She now has a five seat margin in the House. That's the narrowest majority either party has had in modern times in the House. She can only lose two or three votes and get anything through the House. And she has a caucus that's divided. You've got AOC and members of the squad in that caucus, and you've got Abigail Spanberger and other members who were elected in districts that were won by Donald Trump. She has though, managed to hold them together pretty well. Maybe the narrowness of their majority means that nobody feels free to really take a flyer, but it is a political task.

Victor Shi:

Well, your book shares so many amazing stories about Speaker Pelosi and obviously we can't get to them all during this podcast, but your book makes clear Speaker Pelosi is one of the most looked up to women in America. And you also mentioned during this podcast as well, and also in the book that she's this deeply polarizing and controversial figure, and that many people don't understand her. 50 years from now, 100 years from now, what do you think her legacy will be as students my age or other young people look back on her career in her time as Speaker?

Susan Page:

A lot of people think Nancy Pelosi will be in the history books because she was the first woman Speaker, she was the most powerful woman in American history, and that's true. But I think if Nancy Pelosi were male, she would still be in the history books for the legislation that she pushed through at a difficult time, the Affordable Care Act, the financial rescue package. She has been at the center of the biggest events in our country in the 21st century. She was the ranking Democrat on the House Intelligence Committee at 9/11. She was the most senior Member of Congress to oppose the Iraq War from the start. She pushed through the financial rescue package. She was responsible for passage of the Affordable Care Act. And then at the point she was thinking about retiring, she became the Democratic face of the opposition to the most disruptive president in our history. That's someone who's going to be in the history books for any number of reasons.

Jill Wine-Banks:

Wow, that might be a good place to end our talk, but I just want to ask a few more questions. Do you think she will run for another term?

Susan Page:

I don't think so. I don't say that with confidence. She hasn't made a Shermanesque kind of statement. But when she was elected speaker in 2018, she made a commitment that she would only serve two more terms. It wasn't written to the rules. You can't arrest her if she doesn't do that, but she indicated this year that she remembered that commitment and was likely to pay attention to it. So I think this is a natural time for her to step down. She'll have had two years with the Biden presidency, that's going to be probably the best time to get big legislation through. She's 81 years old, any place but Congress, that would be retiring age.

Jill Wine-Banks:

Yes. So who do you think is best positioned to replace her?

Susan Page:

I'm sure there'll be a fight, but the names that are considered most likely Hakeem Jeffries from New York, in the leadership now close to Pelosi, he would be a groundbreaker. He would be if elected the first person of color to lead a party in one of the Chambers of Congress. There are a couple other names. Adam Schiff would like I think to run for the leadership. Karen Bass, also from California. She would be a groundbreaker too as an African American woman and a former Speaker of the California House.

One of the things, I think that if you look at the people who have the Nancy Pelosi seal of approval among the next generation, look at the people she named to be impeachment managers the first time Trump was impeached, that was a huge job, an important job, an historic place. She named Hakeem Jeffries, Adam Schiff as the top manager, Val Demings. Her decision to put Val Demings, the Congresswoman from Florida on it made her a contender for Biden's Vice President. Jason Crow, a Congressman from Colorado who actually opposed her as speaker, but now they've become friends. These are the people I think she sees as rising to leadership positions down the road.

Jill Wine-Banks:

The three you specifically named are all really good public speakers. So when you talked about her in the beginning, you said that's not her strength, is she's more the behind the scenes whipping person. But Hakeem Jeffries is a phenomenal speaker, as are the others, so that's very interesting.

Susan Page:

Well, each Congressional leader, each leader, not even just in Congress, they've got their own styles, they've got their own strengths and weaknesses. The next Speaker will not be like Nancy Pelosi, but they should hope to be as effective as Nancy Pelosi has been.

Victor Shi:

Yeah. So one last question. We always like to end with kind of getting to know or any advice that our guests would have for younger people. And for you to be such a prolific author and also such a fierce reporter at the USA Today, what advice do you have for younger students who are getting involved in journalism who may be looking at a possible career path in journalism?

Susan Page:

Well, the advice I've generally given is just say yes. You get an opportunity, just say yes. I think this is something that women in particular sometimes have problems doing. Somebody offers you a job and you think you're not the best qualified person. Just say yes, just do it. It's something you think is terrifying, what's the worst thing that can happen? You'll just try and you'll fail, then you'll pick yourself back up, and you'll have learned something. So that is I've taken several jobs I thought I wasn't entirely qualified to fill, and it's worked out okay. So just do it.

Victor Shi:

Mm-hmm (affirmative). And do you have any more books planned?

Susan Page:

This transcript was exported on May 12, 2021 - view latest version [here](#).

I want to do a book, I want to do a third book, but I do not have a topic. What do you think, should I do it about Jill? That would be pretty fun, wouldn't it?

Jill Wine-Banks:

That would be so much fun, but I think we need someone else. I don't know.

Susan Page:

Well, I'm in market for ideas, so feel free to pass them along.

Jill Wine-Banks:

Okay. I'm going to give that some thought.

Victor Shi:

Yeah.

Jill Wine-Banks:

Some important things. This was an absolutely fantastic conversation. I am so grateful and so lucky to be able to call you a friend and to have this kind of quality on our show. We appreciate it enormously and we hope that everyone listening or watching will go out and buy both of her books.

Victor Shi:

Yes, this one as well. All right, thank you so much, Susan.

Susan Page:

Okay, thank you. It's been my pleasure to be with you. Thank you.

Jill Wine-Banks:

Thank you very much.