

Susan Page: She's historic because she's the first woman to serve as Speaker of the House, the highest ranking, the most powerful woman in American history.

[MUSIC INTRO]

Joyce Brayboy: Good afternoon everyone. And welcome to Talks at GS. I'm excited today to be joined by Susan Page. Susan is a Washington Bureau Chief of *USA Today* and author of a recently published biography entitled *Madame Speaker: Nancy Pelosi and the Lessons of Power*. Susan, thank you so much for joining us.

Susan Page: Joyce, it's so great to be with. Thanks so much for this opportunity.

Joyce Brayboy: You've should such an incredible career in journalism covering and writing so many important stories. I think it would be helpful, and I'd be really interested, if you would share some of your views on why journalism is such a necessary and powerful tool.

Susan Page: Well, when I was a local reporter, I was a local reporter for *Newsday*, I covered Smithtown and then got promoted to cover Islip on Long Island, there you could have really direct impact on people's lives. You would be the only reporter covering a city council meeting. And what you reported would really affect what people knew about in that town, what they thought about their officials.

The impact as a national reporter is a little different, but also, I think, profound. And it's really been since the November election that the idea has been reinforced in my mind about how crucial it is that we have an independent press and a press that is trusted by Americans so that we can have some, not agreement on ideology, maybe, but agreement on the facts. We find what has happened, certainly, the disputes over the 2020 election have driven that home.

It's been a time, just these last few months since the election, since the assault on the Capitol on January 6th that I've just felt how crucial it is for our democracy to have a free and fair press.

Joyce Brayboy: Now let's talk about your work as an author. Your first book, *The Matriarch*, about First Lady Barbara Bush, was a *New York Times* bestseller. And your second book, *Madame Speaker*, recently made the list as well. Congratulations. Why did you

decide to write a biography about Nancy Pelosi in particular?

Susan Page: So, I always wanted to be a daily news reporter. That's really what I've done. And this business of biographies has been kind of a late starting side life for me, something I've really enjoyed over the last four years producing these two books.

I thought, you know, in a way I wanted to write a biography of Pelosi for the same reason I thought Barbara Bush was interesting. They're very different in many ways, of course, but both of them are people who have been consequential, who have had impact on our nation. And they're people who I think have not always been fully understood. Nancy Pelosi, in particular. Widely caricatured. She's seen as a hero by some. But also portrayed as a villain by others. I felt that people did-- knew her but didn't know her well. Quite well known, but not known well. Is that the phrase? And that she was deserving of a serious look.

You know, she's historic because she's the first woman to serve as Speaker of the House, the highest ranking, the most powerful woman in American history. She's also consequential because of the things she's done in that role, regardless of gender. So, that was the story I wanted to tell.

Joyce Brayboy: And in writing the book, you spent over two years doing research and conducting numerous interviews with a very interesting array of people, including her husband, Paul, some of her close friends, her political foes like Former Speaker Newt Gingrich and Speaker Pelosi herself. Tell us a little bit about that process.

Susan Page: Well, let me just talk about interviewing Pelosi, because of course that was so important. But the fact is, I signed the contract to write this book without talking to her about whether she would cooperate, which may have been stupid. Possibly. But my reasoning was that if I ask her for cooperation beforehand and she said no, maybe I would chicken out. And if I ask her for cooperation beforehand and she said yes, that she might think she had some sway over what I would write. And I didn't want to do an authorized biography. I wanted to do a work of journalism.

So, signed the contract. Went to her staff. Said I would sign this contract and could I interview her. They agreed to one interview. We had no agreement beyond that.

So, I go into this interview. I had interviewed her over the years a couple times, of course, just in relation to breaking news stories. But I went into this first interview for the book. And it's, number one, I think it's possible it's my only interview, so I better get something good out of it. And also, I wanted to make a good impression so that it would not be the only interview I got with her.

And she offers me when I come in a Dove bar, which is actually, I thought, a very good sign. She's a complete chocoholic. She loves ice cream and chocolate. So, she gives me a Dove bar. And she has a Dove bar. And I bite into my Dove bar, and I send little shards of chocolate all over her pristine, off-white carpet in the speaker's office. And there I am trying to make a good impression while picking up tiny shards of melting chocolate from her carpet. And I'm thinking, she will never let me come back again.

She did, in fact, agree to more interviews. I had ten interviews in all for the book. But I have to tell you, Joyce, she never again offered me any food.

Joyce Brayboy: Yeah, I did read that story. And that is a great one. I've heard several people comment about the comments that Former Speaker John Boehner shared about his experience and observations of working with her and also just as her role as a powerful woman leader.

Susan Page: Well, John Boehner, the Former Republican Speaker had some very nice things to say about Nancy Pelosi, in some ways more positive things than he had to say about the Republicans who succeeded him as leaders of the Congress and some of his Republican colleagues. He said that she was the most powerful speaker of his lifetime and, maybe, in American history. But he also said that the fact that she has basically one gear, which is full speed ahead, had sometimes cost her. And he told me that there were times when he tried to lower the temperature in Washington, reduce some of the rhetoric that Republicans and Democrats were hurling at each other. And that she never reciprocated.

And that was something also that aides to President George W Bush told me. That you may remember when, the first time he was delivering a State of the Union address with Pelosi in the Speaker's chair, so the first time a woman had been seated behind the president for a State of the Union address, he made

some very gracious comments to her. He recalled her father, who had served five terms in the House. He made a very gracious point about the history of that moment. And he felt, according to some of his senior aides, that she never kind of reciprocated the gesture. That it was still the toughest possible politics all the time. And of course, they were in particular conflict over the Iraq War. She told me that she viewed the Iraq War as the worst mistake in American history.

Joyce Brayboy: I wonder, how did her family and her upbringing, as you have learned more about her and her family, how did that upbringing influence her desire to get into politics?

Susan Page: You know, Joyce, I'm not sure everyone understood what kind of family she came from in Baltimore. They think of her as a San Francisco liberal. And of course, that's true. But she was really born into political royalty in Baltimore. The D'Alesandros of Baltimore were as prominent as the Kennedys were in Boston. And that was true not only of her father who was this bigger than life mayor, a guy who had been expelled from parochial school at age 13 and never went back, and yet managed to be the three-term mayor of Baltimore and a contender for the governorship, and a nominee, although he failed, and he lost that election for the US Senate. Her mother was an amazing figure as well. Her mother, known as "big Nancy," compared to the daughter, her only daughter, "little Nancy." She had to leave Baltimore to get away from the nickname little Nancy.

Big Nancy was this smart, ambitious, restless woman, well ahead of her time. She was a big risk taker. She played the ponies at Pimlico. I went to Sabatino's, which is still a restaurant in Little Italy. And the owner there talked about the mayor coming in the of pay off the debts to the bookies of his wife of horses she had backed that had not won at Pimlico.

Joyce Brayboy: But are there any specific moments or events in her early career that clearly define Speaker Pelosi as a powerful woman that led her to become speaker?

Susan Page: You know, there was only one race she ever lost. She didn't get involved in electoral politics until she was 46. But a few years before that, she ran for national chair of the Democratic committee. This was in 1984 after Walter Mondale, whom we just lost a couple weeks ago, after Walter Mondale's debacle, she had been California Democratic Chair. She thought she was the strongest candidate to be national chair. She probably was. There was a pretty sexist campaign run against

her, including by the AFLCIO labeling her as an airhead. Now, Nancy Pelosi may be many things, she is not an airhead. She lost that race. And it stung. And she complained about the sexism of that race.

But she told me that she learned more lessons from losing that race than from any other contest that she was in. And you can see it in her attitude after that. It was in that race that she devised a slogan that she still uses all the time, which is, "Don't agonize. Organize." And that is the direct result of her experience in that race when there were people she thought should be with her with turned out not to be with her when she didn't get the credit she thought she deserved for her achievements in organizing the California Democratic Party. Don't agonize. Organize, is one of her slogans.

Her number one slogan though, is something from her father. Which is, "No one is going to give you power. You have to seize it." And that has been a principle that he used. He won his first election by challenging a six-term Democratic incumbent for Congress, challenging him in the Democratic primary. She followed that as well. She ran in that first race, in a special election for Congress in San Francisco, when there were other candidates who seemed more likely to be elected. And when she wanted to get into leadership, she also took that to heart, don't wait for somebody to give you power, they never will. Go out and get it.

Joyce Brayboy: One of the things I learned from the book and found most interesting is the story you tell about election night 2016, November 8th, 2016, to be exact. At that time, Pelosi was already the most powerful woman in American political history. But you discovered in an interview with Judy Woodruff from *PBS NewsHour*, that she was actually preparing to give up the title by choice. And as quoted in your book, known only to her confidants, her plans had just been upended that night when Minority Leader Pelosi, at the time, had made the decision to step away from her role as leader of the Democratic Caucus in the House, once Hillary Clinton was elected the first woman president. Did that surprise you to learn that? And then, of course, that didn't turn out to be the case.

Susan Page: Well, of course, Nancy Pelosi, not the only person around surprised when Donald Trump won in 2016. But she had been. It did upend her plan. She had not talked about it in public. But she was making plans to step back. I mean, she was 76 years old. Any place but Congress, that would be retirement

age. But it was that night when the returns came, and she talked to Bob Brady who was a Paul from Philadelphia, kind of in the mold of her father, who gave her an early heads up that things were not going as expected in Pennsylvania. That was her first sign that Hillary Clinton was not going to win that night.

By the end of that night, she had decided that she would not step away. That she would stick around to stand up to this president she had opposed so much. Remember, Democrats had a really weak hand at that point. They didn't even control the White House or the House or the Senate. And she had the kind of experience she thought would be valuable in trying to figure out how to both stand up to him, and also to win back control of the House, which she did two years later.

Joyce Brayboy: I would love to just get some of your views as we talk about, you know, sort of politics today. And in your role as the Washington Bureau Chief, what are some of the differences that stand out thus far as you all are covering the Biden administration compared to the past four years of the previous administration?

Susan Page: It's pretty different. I mean, the Trump administration was different from all the administrations that came before it. I mean, the first White House I covered was the Reagan administration. I've seen a lot of them. The Trump administration was really very unique.

And the Biden administration, President Biden has tried very hard, I think, to do some things deliberately to make things a little less hot. To make the White House a little less newsworthy. It's just, I mean, with the Trump White House, we at *USA Today* had to shift around our allocation of resources in the Washington bureau because the White House took so much energy. And because it kind of stole power from all the other agencies of government. There was really no need to cover the Agriculture Department. All the key decisions about everything seemed to be made by the president alone, and sometimes in a manner that seemed almost whimsical.

We also had to beef up our staffing early in the morning because we had to get somebody on the job at 6 a.m. because he would start tweeting then. And somebody on the job until midnight because sometimes he would be tweeting important, consequential decisions. So, that has changed.

We've gone back to a world in which people don't really need to

start working until 8. And about 8 p.m., it's pretty safe to go home. So, in a way, the adrenaline level is a little lower. And maybe that's not a bad thing.

Joyce Brayboy: I wanted to ask you about the racial and civil unrest of last summer. It's been almost a year since we, as a nation, witnessed unprecedented protests erupt around the country and all over the world. As Americans, we were crying out for racial justice and equality. And there was no place more vocal or at the center of attention than right here in Washington and in front of the White House. Do you think that pivotal moment in American history will soon be forgotten and there won't be any real progress made in terms of implementing policy changes that would make a difference?

Susan Page: It's such a difficult question and such an important one. And you know, we're just coming up on the one year anniversary of the killing of George Floyd. And, you know, one of the things that was so remarkable after his death and after the footage of his death became so familiar to all of us, was the outpouring of protest in cities across America. Now, there was a handful of violent protests. They got a lot of attention. But if you were looking at the news, there were these enormous protests, and really diverse ones. Not just people of color marching. Millions of Americans marched then, even in the beginning of this terrible pandemic, to protest what they saw happening. And I think it had the effect in newsrooms and in board rooms and in realtor offices and everywhere else about the reality of systemic racism in our country, that I think a lot of people, a lot of people who had not, people of color, did not fully understand. I think it stands as a pivot point for American culture.

Now, I don't know exactly where it goes. But I don't think it's one of those things that, "Gee, we covered that six months ago. We don't need to cover that now." We're talking now about how we're going to cover that one year anniversary and how we're going to go forward in trying to look at American culture and the role of race in more serious ways than we have in the past.

Joyce Brayboy: I'm glad to hear that you think it is something that, hopefully, won't just be forgotten and passed over.

So, on a lighter note though, I just want to ask, again, a little bit more about the interviews you did with Speaker Pelosi. Was there anything that surprised you the most? And what would you say was the biggest lesson of power for Speaker

Pelosi?

Susan Page: You know, Joyce, Nancy Pelosi is a pretty tough interview. Now, the previous biography I had done was with Barbara Bush. Barbara Bush was a fantastic interview. If you could dare to ask Barbara Bush a question, she would answer it. There was no question she wouldn't answer. My jaw would drop when she was telling me how much she hated Nancy Reagan, for instance. Not a good relationship there.

With Nancy Pelosi, she's very disciplined. She's very private. She says she's shy, which is rare in a politician. She's quite guarded. She has her talking points. It is hard to get her to go past her talking points. Although, the longer I interviewed her, the more often I interviewed her, the more candid she became. And I think the best interview I had with her happened to fall on the day that things blew up between Pelosi and AOC and the squad in the House Democratic Caucus. It was a dispute over the four progressive young women's defection on a vote on an immigration bill that Pelosi had really whipped. She had wanted Democrats to vote for that. It degenerated into some attacks by Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's Chief of Staff on other Democratic members of the house. Something that was unheard of. It was a huge fire storm.

And Pelosi comes to this interview, thank goodness she didn't cancel it, like an hour and a half after this had happened, this Democratic Caucus meeting. And so, I'm asking her about it. And she's becoming annoyed that I'm asking about it. She says, "You know, it's just Democrats being Democrats. There's nothing to see here." And I finally used a phrase that she has used, which is, I said, "Do the members of the squad recognize the difference between making a fine pate and making sausage?" Because one thing that Pelosi says is, "We'd all like to make a fine pate, but most of the time we're making sausage." Meaning that it's a courser business and it's pretty messy.

And that really set her off. And she said, "No, they don't understand the difference." And then she said, she was actually quoting Dave Obey, former Appropriations Chairman from Wisconsin, a late member of Congress. Dave Obey used to say, "Some people come here to pose for holy pictures and say, 'See how pure I am?' And other people come here to get things done."

Joyce Brayboy: For you as a woman in a leadership position, what pieces of advice do you often share with other younger women, regardless of the industries or career paths they're in, that we

can all learn from?

Susan Page: Well, there's one piece of advice I give young women who come to me for advice. And that is just three words long. It's "just say yes." And what that means is, if you have an opportunity, just take it. If somebody gives you a chance to do something, even if you think you're going to fail, just do it. What is the worst thing that can happen? You'll try. You'll fail. You'll learn something. You'll do it better the next time.

And this may not be so true of women, young women today. But certainly, it was true of women of my generation. That many women I thought were very able, were reluctant to just say yes. They thought they weren't the most qualified. They thought somebody else could do the job better. They worried about what it would mean to try and fail.

I've pretty much followed the rule that if it terrifies you, you should especially say yes. Then it's especially worth doing to see if you can do it or not. So, "just say yes" is my best advice. Although, I do think "nobody is going to give you power, you have to seize it," is good advice as well.

Joyce Brayboy: Well, it's just been such a really delight and a pleasure for me to have the opportunity to spend some time with you, to have you share so many insights on your remarkable career. Thank you so much, Susan. And we really appreciate your time.

Susan Page: Hey, Joyce, thank you so much. It's been my privilege.

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