

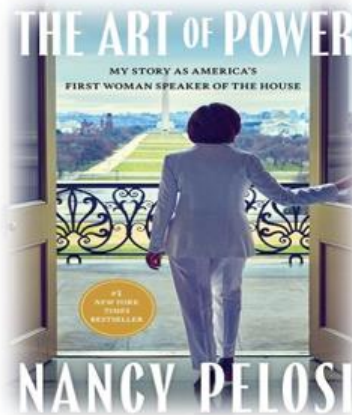
# JEFFERSON EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

## Book Notes #198

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### “This, That, & the Other X” The Art of Power ... or Maybe Not



Why does she generate so much venom?

What is her “the art of power”? Why does her masterful wielding of it unnerve some people?

Ironically, and most importantly, why does her description of exercising the “art of power” now seem almost quaint?

How might that mark a hinge point in American history?

***Dot #1. Who is Nancy Pelosi, and why does she generate so much venom?*** She is the most powerful and successful female political leader in American history. That is not damning with faint praise. She is one of the most powerful and successful Speakers of the House of Representatives ever. Compared to her, current Speaker Mike Johnson is a pipsqueak. Deep in his heart, he knows that.

She embodies everything the suffragists and the women of Second Wave Feminism fought for. Pelosi understands that truth. She understands that she represents the successful end of their quest for “a seat at the table.”

What table? The table at which decisions are made.

Pelosi eloquently related her frame of mind as she attended her first White House meeting with President George W. Bush as part of the Democratic leadership team. Bush noted her historic role as the first woman to ever attend such a meeting and that she would add a new perspective. Pelosi recounts her thinking as Bush spoke:

My chair started to feel crowded, and I had the sensation of being surrounded. It was as if I were being joined by the great women’s rights activists and leaders Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucretia Mott, Sojourner Truth, and Alice Paul. I was not alone in my chair; all of them were sitting with me saying, **have a seat at the table**. My next thought was, ‘We want more.’ [1]

That is why in the cover photo for “The Art of Power,” she stands on the Speaker’s Balcony overlooking the Mall in Washington, D.C. in a white suit – the uniform of the suffragists.

And that makes many men (and some women, too) crazy.

Why?

***Dot #2. She is both Meg and Jo March.*** Pelosi is simultaneously the embodiment of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century ideas of domesticity and true womanhood and their rejection. Since the struggle began in Seneca Falls, New York, in 1848, those ideas were the cultural values the women’s movement fought to overcome for its

entire history seeking women's equality. It was a set of values preaching that a woman's proper place was in the home serving men and raising children. For some men (and a few women, too), a woman who doesn't know her "place" is a maddening threat. She threatens the patriarchy's dominance; in so doing, she threatens society's foundational values. You hear their echoes today in Vice President J.D. Vance's attacks on "childless cat women" and calls for a new "natalism."

In American literature, the greatest expression of those ideas (and their discontents) is Louisa May Alcott's classic "Little Women." I've discussed it before in multiple **Book Notes** on the women's movement and the novel itself, [which can be found here](#). In short, the cult of true womanhood dictated a woman's primary duties were piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity. Piety meant a woman was to be an exemplar of Christian virtue and charity; purity meant sexual purity – a woman's duty was to present her husband the gift of her virginity; submissiveness meant she was to defer in all matters to her husband's judgment; and domesticity meant exactly what it sounds like – a woman's most important duty was to be a wife, a mother, and the keeper and protector of the domestic hearth. In the novel, the preternaturally patient mother "Marmee" and the eldest daughter Meg exemplify those virtues.

It is the second sister Jo who embodies many women's discontent with the suffocating restrictions those requirements imposed. She yearns for the freedom boys have to venture out into the world, to have a career, and to become, as in the old United States Army ad, all she can be. She is Louisa May Alcott's alter ego. Rejecting those values, Alcott never married and never had children. In the novel, Jo marries, but she also becomes a professional writer.

Pelosi is both Meg and Jo.

She is the daughter of Thomas and Annunciata D'Alesandro. Her father was both mayor of Baltimore and a U.S. Congressman. In many ways, Pelosi is her father's daughter. She is also a wife. She married businessman Paul Pelosi in 1962. Sixty-three years later, they're still married, which in the age of divorce is a testimony to the quality of their character and commitment. As Pelosi herself says, "From housewife to House member to House speaker, I certainly would have never broken the marble ceiling without Paul's support, encouragement, and love." [2] She is the mother of five children. Like "Marmee" and Meg, she repeatedly demonstrates that nothing is more important to her than her family.

But she is also Jo. I said above, she is her father's daughter – a consummate politician. But she is also her mother's daughter – Annunciata D'Alesandro. As Sheryl Gay Stolberg said in a New York Times article when Pelosi began her second tenure as Speaker of the House, Pelosi's mother was "an equally powerful

role model. ‘Big Nancy,’ as she was known, was a strategist, an organizer of Democratic women and the keeper of what the family called ‘the favor file.’ From her, Pelosi learned the power of social networking and the personal approach to negotiating’s give and take.” [3]

After she and Paul moved to San Francisco, Pelosi’s priority was raising her family. As her parents’ daughter, however, she volunteered in California Democratic politics in the mid-1960s. Over 20 years later, after having risen to chair the California state Democratic Party, in 1987, she was elected to Congress. In 2001, she was elected House minority whip and then House minority leader. She was the first woman in either house of Congress elected by her peers to those offices. In 2007, she became the first woman elected Speaker of the House of Representatives. In 2019, when the Democrats again reclaimed the House majority, she was again elected Speaker.

In “The Art of Power,” Pelosi details her masterful use of networking and negotiating to achieve her legislative goals. She exhorted, negotiated, “gave and took,” and sometimes pressured others to support the causes she championed. She fended off the Bush administration’s attempt to privatize Social Security, opposed the War in Iraq, and guided the passage of the Affordable Care Act, the Dodd-Frank Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act, the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021, the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, the CHIPS and Science Act, the Inflation Reduction Act of 2022, and the Respect for Marriage Act.

***Dot #3. How did she do that? What is her “art of power?”*** Pelosi doesn’t give a detailed theoretical explanation of how she practices politics. Instead, she shows it in her descriptions of how all that legislation was passed. It was enacted by old-fashioned negotiating and deal-making based on personal relationships between those who might differ on the details, often quite significantly, but who agreed on certain foundational principles. Those principles are the equality of all Americans as stated in the Declaration of Independence, the U.S. Constitution, and the rule of law. In short, she practiced the sometimes rough and rowdy politics (Pelosi says, “running for office isn’t for the faint of heart,” [4]) practiced by those who believe in *The American Way*.

Pelosi doesn’t spell any of this out. She shows it in practice. Is she herself above reproach? No; at times she can be disingenuous. For instance, when she says she never made a call to anyone advocating that President Joe Biden withdraw his candidacy in 2024. She says, however, that a lot of people called her. Well, yes, but on those calls, one can then tell “X” to have “Y” “call me” and preserve the fiction that you never called anyone directly. Nevertheless, she almost always played the game straight, often won, and found that her success not only brought her friends but also enemies.

What she does spell out are the two things that anyone in public office must know. First, she says they need to know their *why*. Second, she adds that they need to understand that politics is all about *relationships*.

Regarding knowing one's *why*, Pelosi means that any leader or political figure needs to know why they are doing this. As she says, "Why are you running? What is your vision, knowledge, and judgment? How do you hope to succeed? When you run, you become a target. Being certain of your "why" makes it worth it. [5] Although she doesn't mention him, she means the same thing Friedrich Nietzsche meant when he said "He (*sic*) who has a why to live for can bear almost any how." What both Pelosi and Nietzsche mean is that one must have a purpose, a vision one wants to attain to find the strength to inspire others to follow you. You need to be able to communicate that vision by both what you say and what you do.

It is the essence of leadership.

What is Pelosi's *why*? Repeatedly, she says her motivation is to improve the lives of all Americans, but most importantly, the lives of children. She quotes the late civil rights icon and U.S. Congressman John Lewis who said there is "a spark of divinity in every person that needs to be respected." [6] A devout Roman Catholic, Pelosi says that her core values come "from the Gospel of Matthew 25: 'For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me. ...'" [7] Children's welfare and care motivate her because, at the risk of a banality, they can't defend themselves, and they are the future.

Some who have read the book tell me they find her *why* saccharine and not quite totally believable. They struggle to reconcile it with the hard-nosed, deal-making politician. I don't. If you are going to play the game, then you play to win. As anyone who has ever led an organization of consequence can tell you, leading and managing isn't always simple and clean. It's real, and the real can get messy. Pelosi is a realist. She's also the mother of five children who are both successful and loyal to her. I believe her.

As a master negotiator and dealmaker, she understands politics is all about relationships. She learned that from her mother and father. Those relationships can be based on either shared values and mutual loyalty or simple transactionalism: you do this for me; I will do this other thing for you. She is a virtuoso at it. She and former six-term Mayor of Erie Lou Tullio would understand one another perfectly. Tullio was a virtuoso of personal politics, who like Pelosi, had the sense and the interpersonal skill to almost always find common ground with his political opponents. Democratic (small "d") politics is all about finding that place in the middle that everyone can share. None of us gets all we want; but

we both get enough of what we want so that we can live in mutual peace and prosperity.

Regardless of what side of the aisle you sit on, that brand of politics now sadly almost looks quaint.

***Dot #4. How did Pelosi's brand of politics come to look quaint?*** Pelosi's way is (or was) the American way. Benjamin Franklin said it best when comparing politics to a carpenter making a smooth joint. You take a bit from this piece and a bit from this other piece until they are both smooth and they fit seamlessly together making a strong joint that can withstand the pressures of usage. Unfortunately, after the scorched earth politics of Newt Gingrich, who prohibited Republican members of Congress from becoming friends with Democrats, the acts of working across the aisle to build strong bonds became a lost art.

Having lost that art, American politics became a stew sauced with vitriol and enemy-making. That political stew was then seasoned by the wounding spices of 24/7 cable news talking heads bleating at one another. In the early 21st century, the tainted stew of American politics was further polluted by a new ingredient – the viciousness of social media. Pelosi begins her book by recounting the horrific attack upon her husband Paul.

Fueled by a steady diet of endorphin hits from consuming the poisonous postings on the darker edges of right-wing social media, a troll chanting “Where’s Nancy? Where’s Nancy?” broke into her San Francisco home, hunting her. When he discovered she was not there, he fractured Paul’s skull with a hammer. As awful as that was, it was the subsequent dehumanizing jokes posted on social media by prominent Republicans that were the true horror. As Pelosi relates, “Donald Trump Jr. was among the worst. On Twitter (now X), he shared a meme of a hammer with the tagline, ‘Got my Paul Pelosi Halloween costume ready.’” [8]

Because of all of this, America might be at a hinge point in its history. Hinge points are those moments (eras) after which everything is different. American politics has deteriorated from the rational compromise of Benjamin Franklin to a social media circus of performative politics, rhetorical posturing, citizens exchanging insults and threats, others, some in bear costume, invading the U.S. Capitol Building, and still others breaking into homes and assaulting political leaders’ families. Where once there was an editorial function refereeing the contest, now there is nothing. It has become a chaotic situation where the loudest, nastiest voices reign.

Before you tell me that American politics was always like this, I will say, “Yes, but ... .” Once there were editors, there were actual political parties and reasonable party leaders who dialed down the melodrama to protect the governing

institutions. They are almost all gone. They've been replaced by agitprop consultants who go over the heads of what's left of the party structure with direct appeals to the people. In theory, that sounds good; in practice, not so much whether we are talking about the participatory democracy of the mid-20th-century New Left or the current "take no prisoners" politics of Steve Bannon and the New Right.

Although some might argue that it is already too late to preserve the "quaint" politics of Ben Franklin, Henry Clay, Everett Dirksen, Ronald Reagan and Tip O'Neill, and Nancy Pelosi, we need to tame the social media beast without ravaging the First Amendment. That will require reestablishing some approximation of the editorial function overseeing social media apps. That seemingly simple suggestion, however, has been attacked as censorship. It has sent Silicon Valley's tech-bros in a sprint to Washington to shed responsibility for their platforms' content.

For now, Nancy Pelosi's "The Art of Power" provides a thought-provoking look at how one master of old politics succeeded. To the reaction that the master is a woman sending some men (and women, too) over the edge, I say, "grow up and get a grip."

The greater issue is how to preserve the politics of government of, by, and for the people. When asked how long he thought the American experiment would last, John Adams famously replied that he gave it 200 years or so. Then it would revert to a government of the one, the few, and the many. Next year is the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence and the 237th anniversary of the U.S. Constitution. We're in bonus time. If taming social media is the challenge of our times, then the fact that the masterful political style of Nancy Pelosi now seems quaint in our cyber-saturated world of disinformation, misinformation, news sources that lie, online trolls, and other assorted miscreants nudging our democracy ever closer to Caesarism is the crisis of our times.

For a powerful analysis of the power of knowing your *why*, see this TED talk by Simon Sinek: "[How Great Leaders Inspire Action](#)."



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### End Notes

1. **House. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2024), p.1.**
2. *Ibid.*, p. 29.
3. Stolberg, Sheryl Gay, “*Nancy Pelosi, Icon of Female Power, Will Reclaim Role as Speaker and Seal a Place in History,*” in **The New York Times** (Jan. 2, 2019) available at [Nancy Pelosi, Icon of Female Power, Will Reclaim Role as Speaker and Seal a Place in History - The New York Times](#) accessed Feb. 9, 2025.
4. Pelosi, cited above, p. 7.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 4.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 2.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 3.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 26.

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