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The Age of Nancy

By **GAIL COLLINS**

Let us sing a song about the wonderfulness of Nancy Pelosi.

What a run she's been on. This week — with the big financial reform package edging toward completion, and the House approving a major campaign finance reform bill — was a reminder of what an incredibly productive speaker she's become.

Last winter, when Washington was backing away from the whole health care deal after the Republicans won Ted Kennedy's Senate seat, Pelosi was uncowed. "We'll go through the gate. If the gate's closed, we'll go over the fence. If the fence is too high, we'll pole vault in," she said. "If that doesn't work, we'll parachute in. But we're going to get health care reform passed for the American people."

I sort of like the image of Nancy Pelosi parachuting in. Would she wear her high heels? Probably not, but her hair would still look as if it had been blow-dried by a stylist on the way out of the airplane.

She's a 70-year-old perpetual motion machine who seems, in her public appearances, both ultra-programmed and ultra-intense. Many Americans were first introduced to her when the new speaker sat behind President Bush at his State of the Union speech in 2007, blinking so ferociously that she seemed to be sending out Morse code distress calls from the back of the podium.

In conversation, she's a runaway train. Talking about global warming in an interview last week, she warned: "You don't want me to go into the melting of the polar cap and the glaciers and the great rivers of Southeast Asia and the water supply in Tibet and the encroachment of the Gobi Desert and the sandstorms in Beijing and the rise of sea level in all of our maritime areas in the world and. ... I would just recommend you go to Alaska to see what is happening."

The Republicans have turned Pelosi into the Demon Grandmother — in ads, a satanic figure in the flames of deficit spending, or a 50-foot monster smashing houses with her big-government feet. (She seems utterly indifferent to the endless public pummeling — although she did express some dismay, in an interview with The Times's Mark Leibovich, that people had been speculating that she might have had a face-lift.)

But even the public that likes the legislation she's been churning out tends to underestimate her.

Maybe that's because she came up through the ranks of the California Democratic Party, and then the House, with a reputation as a prodigious fund-raiser. It's an idea Pelosi herself isn't comfortable with. She rejects the description of her early party-building activities as being about raising money. "I wasn't a fund-raiser. I was like a small businesswoman," she protested.

She is, at any rate, a person who combines the high ideals of politics with a sure grasp of the very practical realities. Some progressives will never forgive Pelosi for caving in to the anti-abortion forces during the health care negotiations or for giving the National Rifle Association an exemption in the new campaign finance legislation. But the real world has limits, and one of them is that there will never be a major bill to emerge from the House of Representatives that doesn't have something regrettable in it.

Pelosi has actually been very good on ethics. Under her watch in the House, earmarks are fewer and more transparent. Travel rules are tighter. She fought for the creation of a new in-house watchdog, the Office of Congressional Ethics, pushing it over the wire by one vote. Since then, the aggressive ethics office has won the rancor of investigated members of Congress and the hearts of good-government groups.

“She bit the bullet,” said Sarah Dufendach, the vice president for legislative affairs at Common Cause. “That was a very heavy lift, to get the House to do that. I give her really high marks for that.”

Of all the good deeds for which people get punished in Washington, pushing ethics has to be at the top of the list. Your own members resent it, and the public doesn't really give you any credit. It's not likely that people will go to the polls in November and vote Democratic because the House, although still deeply, deeply imperfect, is run with a higher ethical standard than it was before Pelosi got control.

She has been around a long time and must have known that from the start. But she pushed anyway. Pelosi is an idealist working in the practical now. She genuinely sees her party as a vehicle for good and her pragmatism is not the least bit cynical. She is the most powerful woman in the country, the most fearless person on Capitol Hill and on track to be one of the most productive speakers in history.

I don't know about you, but that kind of knocks me out.