

Pelosi Endorses Murtha as Next Majority Leader

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House Speaker-to-be [Nancy Pelosi](#) (D-Calif.) endorsed [Rep. John P. Murtha](#) (D-Pa.) yesterday as the next House majority leader, thereby stepping into a contentious intraparty fight between Murtha and her current deputy, Maryland's [Steny H. Hoyer](#).

The unexpected move signaled the sizable value Pelosi gives to personal loyalty and personality preferences. Hoyer competed with her in 2001 for the post of House minority whip, while Murtha managed her winning campaign. Pelosi has also all but decided she will not name the ranking Democrat on the House intelligence committee, [Rep. Jane Harman](#) (D-Calif.) to chair that panel next year, a decision pregnant with personal animus.

Pelosi had been outspoken about her frustration with Murtha's declaration that he would challenge Hoyer, currently the House minority whip, for the majority leader post long before Democrats had secured the majority. Many believed she would remain on the sidelines, just as Speaker [J. Dennis Hastert](#) (R-Ill.) did earlier this year when three Republicans vied for the post of House majority leader.

But in her first real decision as the incoming speaker, Pelosi said she was swayed by Murtha's early stance for a withdrawal of [U.S. forces from Iraq](#). Her letter of endorsement yesterday made clear that she sees Iraq as the central issue of the next Congress and that she believes a decorated Marine combat veteran at the helm of the House caucus would provide Democrats ammunition in their fight against congressional Republicans and President Bush on the issue.

"I salute your courageous leadership that changed the national debate and helped make Iraq the central issue of this historic election. It was surely a dark day for the Bush Administration when you spoke truth to power," she wrote. "Your strong voice for national security, the war on terror and Iraq provides genuine leadership for our party, and I count on you to lead on these vital issues."

Murtha responded, "I am deeply gratified to receive the support of Speaker Pelosi, a tireless advocate for change and a true leader for our Party and our country."

Pelosi's decision could be a significant blow to Hoyer, who has worked for years to move up in the Democratic leadership. Political handicappers had regarded Hoyer to be the strong favorite when House Democrats meet Thursday to choose a majority leader for the 110th Congress. Although Murtha's stance on Iraq has made him a hero among many grass-roots party

activists, his positions against abortion and gun control have pushed many House liberals into Hoyer's camp, including the leader of the Out of Iraq Caucus, [Rep. Maxine Waters](#) (D-Calif.).

Hoyer's camp counts 21 of the roughly 40 incoming freshman Democrats as committed supporters. Many freshmen believe the Democrats should stick with the team that brought them to the majority, said John Sarbanes, who was elected last week to represent central Maryland in the House.

Hoyer also has the strong support of many of the party's conservative "Blue Dog" Democrats, who worry about Murtha's involvement in the Abscam bribery sting in 1980 and what they see as his freewheeling style on the House Appropriations Committee, where he has openly advocated for the interests of his district and his political supporters.

Some of Hoyer's supporters put the best face on Pelosi's intervention, saying Murtha would not have asked for a public letter of support if his campaign were not in trouble.

"I don't think it's significant," said [Rep. Dennis Cardoza](#) (D-Calif.), a leading Blue Dog and Hoyer supporter. "Everyone already knew she was supporting Murtha. I don't think this will have much of an impact. Steny's going to win this fight."

But Murtha has garnered the support of some influential Californians close to Pelosi, including [Rep. George Miller](#) (D-Calif.), a liberal firebrand who will chair the House Education and the Workforce Committee.

In a statement, Hoyer said he remains confident he has the votes.

"Nancy told me some time ago that she would personally support Jack. I respect her decisions as the two are very close," he wrote. "I am grateful for the support I have from my colleagues, and have the majority of the caucus supporting me. I look forward to working with Speaker Pelosi as Majority Leader."

Another potentially fractious vote in the House Democratic Caucus was settled late last week when [Rep. Rahm Emanuel](#) (D-Ill.), the outgoing chairman of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, decided against running for House majority whip. [Rep. James Clyburn](#) (D-S.C.), the only African American in the House Democratic leadership, had already announced his candidacy.

Emanuel instead will stand unopposed for the job Clyburn will vacate, House Democratic Caucus chairman. In his announcement, he appealed for party unity ahead of Thursday's leadership elections.

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