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Why Cynthia McKinney Lost Her Seniority  
and Didn't Get It Back  
by Jeff Blankfort

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You might call it a "tale of two women" or "why Cynthia McKinney lost her seniority and didn't get it back." Both women are members of Congress and both are Democrats, but that's where the comparisons end.

McKinney, from Atlanta, Georgia, is an African-American warrior for justice and peace and an enemy of government hypocrisy. The other, Nancy Pelosi, is the white, privileged congresswoman from San Francisco, a consummate politician who, because of her prodigious fundraising abilities, was promoted by the party to run for the seat of the late Sala Burton in 1986 and is now the House Minority leader in Congress, thanks to her loyal service to the party and to the party line.

Serving the truth – not the party line – was how McKinney envisioned her job in Congress when she was elected in 1992, and that led her into a sharp conflict, not only with the Democrats but the Republicans, as well, because speaking the truth required her to speak critically of Israel and in support of justice for the Palestinians – as well as questioning U.S. military adventures abroad.

Indeed, there is no other issue of importance that unites both parties as does their mutual devotion to the welfare of Israel, which at times has taken precedence over their obligations to their constituents. Certainly, in every election year, one finds the most liberal Democrats competing with the most right-wing Republicans to demonstrate who loves Israel the most. At the moment the race is too close to call.

In the aftermath of 9–11, McKinney had additionally antagonized right-wing Republicans when she raised questions about President Bush's prior knowledge of 9–11 and, presciently, the profits that would be made by his cronies. She is still talking about it. "What did he know and when did he know it?" was her challenge.

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And back in Congress, she is once again the most active, if not the only member of Congress pursuing the truth about who was behind the attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.

In 2002, after watching her serve five terms in Congress, the pro-Israel lobby and the Republicans decided they had had enough of McKinney. While party officials looked the other way, the lobby provided an opposition candidate, Denise Majette, and the funds for her campaign, mostly from outside Atlanta, while the Republicans, with no opposing candidate in their own primaries, crossed over to the Democratic side and provided an estimated 40,000 votes – enough to give Majette the victory and assure election that November in the heavily Democratic 4th District.

McKinney was down but not out. In 2004, she was back again, and Majette, with more ambition than brains, decided to run for a vacated seat in the U.S. Senate, a decision that so outraged some of her pro-Israel funders that they publicly demanded that she give them their money back. After all, an investment is an investment.

In that primary, McKinney was facing five opponents, all but one of them with experience in a state or local elected office. Rather than pick one of the candidates to support, the pro-Israel lobby – which couldn't care less about the people of Atlanta, or of the United States, for that matter – was waiting for what it assumed would be a run-off between McKinney and one of the other candidates, at which time it would place its support behind that candidate.

McKinney's goal was to get 51 percent and leave the lobby in the starting blocks, and that's what happened. With grassroots support and little money, and no help from the national party, she staged what should have been called the political comeback of the year. But as she found out, the party wasn't ready to deal with her back in office. One of the most obvious expressions of this was its refusal to give her back her 10 years of seniority.

On July 12, I interviewed McKinney on my KPOO program and she explained what happened: "I was not successful in convincing Nancy Pelosi that my seniority was worth restoring," she told me.

"I was not involved alone in that effort. I am quite confident that there were hundreds, maybe thousands of emails sent from literally every point across this country, from the large urban areas of New York City, Chicago and San Francisco to the still urban but less populated areas like down here in Georgia and throughout the South. I know that there were people all over this country who were interested and who supported the reinstatement of my seniority.

"After all, it is exactly what happened with returning Republicans who came back in the class of 2005, who were sworn in with me. There was Dan Lungren of California, who had been out of Congress 15 years or so, and he returned to Congress as if he had not missed one day. That's because the Republican leadership saw fit to restore his seniority because they valued his experience.

"There was also Bob English from South Carolina, a Republican, who returned after one term out of Congress, just like me. He also was restored his seniority by the Republican leadership. That was not accorded to me and to the legions of people that supported me by Nancy Pelosi."

Regaining her seniority was not just a matter of image. According to a former Washington congressional staffer, "The big advantage is not only committee assignments but moving up the ladder to becoming chairman of the committee itself, and getting chairs of subcommittees. That means more and more staff."

"It is really hard to function in the House with the limited staff you get. Remember you have half a million constituents to serve with 18 people in your district and Washington offices. As you get more assignments, you get more staff, a bigger budget and more office space."

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That is not laughable, as the damned offices are tiny – parking spaces – all the perks that go with it. Freshmen have little cracker boxes, practically no staff, etc. Not getting back her seniority means that a lot of seasoned people she had working for her did not get their jobs back.

As it happens, Pelosi was in San Francisco two days later speaking at a packed town hall meeting at the Marina Middle School in the wealthy Marina district, as far away from Bay View Hunters Point as you can get without stepping in the Bay. At what turned out to be an abbreviated press conference, I told her what McKinney had said and asked her why she hadn't given her seniority back when she was re-elected to Congress. It was not a question she was anticipating.

"As a matter of course," she responded, "seniority is not given back when members come back to Congress."

I informed her that other members of Congress who had been re-elected after leaving office had been given their seniority and asked her who made the decision in McKinney's case: "It's a decision of the steering committee of the leadership," Pelosi coolly replied.

And so, I said, it was decided not to give Cynthia McKinney back her seniority, and that's when Pelosi became a bit flustered.

"Cynthia got ... uh ... Cynthia chose to leave the.... She chose, she left Congress ... uh ... she was voted out," Pelosi stammered, "But there's nothing, nothing there that says, when members come back, that other members should be disrupted in terms of their seniority."

Before I could ask her a follow-up question, she thanked the members of the press and left the room.

I had earlier asked Pelosi why she had not initially supported the resolution to withdraw the troops from Iraq made by Rep. John Murtha, which she had praised during her speech. Her answer was a strange one:

"I never opposed Murtha. From the very first day, I said to my caucus, at the proper time, I will publicly endorse Murtha, but as long as possible I want him to be out there on his own." Like running him up on the flagpole and waiting to see if anyone saluted him.

When asked why she didn't push the Murtha position within the party, she replied, "In our caucus, when it comes to a vote of war, it is strictly a vote of conscience and constituency. It is more important for members to reach their own conclusion on Murtha rather than tell them this is the way I want them to vote. It has more legitimacy if it is something that springs from their difference and their conscience."

As the Chronicle reported the next day, Pelosi, in fact, waited 14 days before endorsing Murtha's call for withdrawal. The reason she finally did so, I have learned from a reliable source, was that her staff took an internal poll and discovered that if Matt Gonzalez, who barely lost the vote for mayor, would run against Pelosi in the primary, he would win. That's when Pelosi became the anti-war politician, but within limits. When asked by a reporter if she was "surprised when people say that you're funding the war? That's what many of those protesters were saying about you," Pelosi responded:

"Well, I won't agree with them that I should not support meeting the needs of our men and women in uniform at this time. I believe that the answer to all of their concerns is the Murtha amendment. If that were to prevail, we would be out of Iraq and the issue would be over, so why don't we focus on something that is doable rather than on something that's not going to happen."

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Such as her not voting and leading the fight against the next multi-billion request by President Bush that will keep the war going.

The protesters she was referring to were a group of about a dozen women led by Global Exchange's Medea Benjamin and another dozen members of the International Socialist Organization, all of whom carried signs that in one way or another, called for ending the funding for the Iraq war.

Although the audience was clearly opposed to the war, it accepted Pelosi's answers and gave her a standing ovation at the end of the question period. Unlike her past town meetings, there were no microphones for the public on the floor and all the questions had to be submitted on special cards. Topics were limited to the war in Iraq, the NSA spy scandal and attacks on our constitutional rights.

Questions concerning her support for Israel and the possibility of a U.S. attack on Iran were off limits. Since it was the weekend preceding the celebration of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday, Pelosi made repeated reference to an Aramaic saying he had learned while visiting India, which she didn't risk pronouncing, but which translates into "Truth Insistence." She referred to it several times during her talk. Whether she followed its precepts, however, is open to question.

Meanwhile, McKinney made her film debut in "American Blackout," an independent film that premiered at the prestigious Sundance Film Festival in Park City, Utah, and which explores the disempowerment of the Black vote through her eyes and political career.

Produced and directed by Ian Inaba, of the Guerilla News Network, the documentary follows McKinney on a journey which includes her protesting the disenfranchisement of Black voters in Florida following the controversial victory of George W. Bush in the 2000 presidential election.

Plans are being made to show the film in San Francisco in June as a benefit for the *SF Bay View*.

*Email Jeff Blankfort at [jblankfort@earthlink.net](mailto:jblankfort@earthlink.net).*