

Presentation address to Madam Nancy Pelosi, Speaker Emerita of the House of Representatives of the United States of America for the Honorary Doctorate in Law awarded by Paris-Panthéon-Assas University

by

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Madam Speaker *Emerita* of the United States House of Representatives,

On June 26 1918, a ministerial decree allowed French universities to award the title of Doctor Honoris Causa to foreign personalities whose action or work was in line with the values promoted by the university.

Since 1918, few women have received this honor. In 1962, the title of Doctor Honoris Causa of the University of Paris was awarded for the first time, in these very premises, to a Norwegian scientist who was a pupil of Marie Curie. The Rector's speech had underlined the exceptional nature of the event. Female politicians who received this honor are even scarcer. Only two of them, and not the least important, were honored in this very place, the *Grand Amphithéâtre de la Sorbonne*: Madam Indira Gandhi, who was then Prime Minister of India, in November 1991 and Madam Michèle Bachelet, President of the Republic of Chile, in 2015. Both awards were conferred in recognition of their tireless fight for democracy.

Thus, Madam Speaker Emerita, you are the third female politician to receive this honorary academic distinction in the *Grand Amphithéâtre de la Sorbonne*. It is difficult for me to find the right words to express the immense honor you have bestowed on our university by accepting this distinction. We wish to pay tribute to your exemplary career. In these uncertain times, it is a source of inspiration and hope for our entire academic community, and in particular for the young students who are present here today.

Please allow me, Madam Speaker *Emerita*, to begin with what you represent for all women: a role model and a source of inspiration. You were born in Baltimore, Maryland, into a Catholic

Italian American family, and even though your father and brother both served as mayors in that City, you were not originally destined to embark on a political career. You married Paul Pelosi and raised five children. It wasn't until 1987, after holding positions of responsibility within the California Democratic Party, that you were elected to the House of Representatives, representing California's 5th Congressional District. Before long, you were vying for leadership positions in the House of Representatives, making you the first woman to shake up the certainties of those you called "an old boys' club", and you announced that you were going to "buck 200 years of history". In 2001, you became the first woman to hold the post of House minority whip. In 2003, again you were the first woman to be elected Minority Leader. In 2011, you made history in an even more significant manner by becoming Speaker of the House of Representatives, making you the third most powerful public figure in the nation. You held this position until 2011, when you became Minority Leader again until 2019. In 2019 you won back the House speakership, a feat which had not been achieved by a Speaker since Rayburn in the 1950s. In an extremely troubled political context, you were back at the top tier of the dais. You left the speakership in January 2023 and kept your seat as representative for California's 11th Congressional District. Ever since your first election to the House, you have not stopped working to increase the number of women in Congress. In 1990, there were only 10% of women in Congress, now there are 30%. Your career is an example and a source of hope for women - and I am thinking of the students here today - who should follow your lead, never doubt their chances of success and never censor themselves.

You have been a public representative for 36 years and you have always been driven by a single goal: to serve the American people and guarantee everyone, especially the weakest, the enjoyment of their rights and a decent life. Your unrivalled legislative work is a reflection of your total and unwavering devotion to the American people.

As soon as you were elected to the House in 1987, you led your first battle to combat the stigmatization of AIDS sufferers by society, and to ensure that they received treatment and a minimum of healthcare coverage at the end of their lives. You have thus saved lives and also shaped the whole system that would become AIDS care. You have consistently pushed for laws which guarantee people who are the victims of discrimination (foreigners, the LGBT community) equal access to civil rights and certain social benefits. You made a decisive contribution to the rescue of the US economy in 2008 at the time of the greatest financial crisis since the 1929 crash. Similarly, you worked to ensure that American citizens had access to masks, vaccines and federal financial aid during the recent global pandemic.

Among your legislative accomplishments, I would like to highlight a landmark piece of legislation that you were the architect of: the *Affordable Care Act* 2010, which brought healthcare coverage to millions of Americans. The fight was risky, as such a project had failed under President Clinton, and it led to the defeat of the Democrats in the following midterms. President Obama had made this reform the flagship project of his campaign, and you brought it to fruition after months of fierce negotiation, and despite the Senate's reluctance. To those who criticized you for what they believed was the political error that led to the defeat of the Democrats in the House, you replied: "We come here to do a job, not keep a job."

You are undoubtedly the main engineer of legislation that will define a generation. You are and will remain the embodiment of the legislative power, the First Branch of Government, enshrined in Article I of the U.S. Constitution. In *Laws* and *The Republic*, the Greek philosopher Plato reflected on what made the great "Legislator" so distinctive and believed that he was the one who drew up a program for a dream city, and thus was both a mythical and historical figure.

Your humanist convictions have led you to tirelessly defend human rights, democracy, and the rule of law.

Since the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests and massacre, you have made the defense of human rights in China one of your top priorities. We also all remember your opposition to the War in Iraq in 2003, your visits to Kyiv in May 2022, to Taiwan in August 2022 and Erevan in September of the same year. These are all messages of hope and support for those fighting for freedom and democracy against the threats and attacks coming from neighboring autocratic regimes.

However, recent history has showed that attacks on the democratic regime can also come from within. It is in your own country that you have had to fight most painful of battles, the battle for respect for the rule of law and the functioning of democratic institutions, even though they are enshrined in the U.S. Constitution. Who would have imagined that one of the world's oldest democracies, which in many ways inspired the France of the Enlightenment and the Revolution, could be threatened from within? You then used every weapon in the U.S. Constitution to counter the constant attacks on the normal functioning of democratic institutions. We all remember your famous filibuster of February 7, 2018. Using the leadership minute, you spoke uninterrupted, standing on 10 cm heels, for 8 hours and 7 minutes, reading dozens of letters from dreamers, those immigrant children who had arrived in the United States illegally and were threatened with deportation following the President's termination of DACA. You have kept fighting to save the

Affordable Care Act from destruction. In 2019, you were again elected Speaker of the House and had no alternative but to use the impeachment procedure twice: first in 2019 for abuse of power and obstruction of Congress, second after the infamous January 6 U.S. Capitol attack, for incitement of insurrection. Both times, the Republican-led Senate absolved the president. Never before, however, had a U.S. President been impeached twice in a single term.

During those four years, you have been the embodiment of the defense of the rule of law and democracy, sometimes even at the risk of your own life. We all watched in disbelief as your office was desecrated and the rioters shouted your name across the Capitol and threatened you. We then realized how precious democracy was, but also how fragile it was in the face of rising populism. Your career, your determination and your courage are an *exemplum* to us all, and particularly to our students, who are here today to honor you.

Please allow me, Madame Speaker *Emerita*, to conclude with a quote from a very famous Italian Prime Minister, Aldo Moro. I will say these words in Italian, a language close to your heart as it is that of your ancestors: "*Il coraggio dell'onore è di resistere. Chi resiste raggiunge la luce*".

Paris, Grand Amphithéâtre de La Sorbonne, 6 November 2023