



Photo courtesy of Steny H. Hoyer

BY ALIZA DAVIDOVIT

The third-most-powerful man in Washington, D.C., can open any door, but he still prefers the old-fashioned way—to open them for women. The tall, graceful, handsome congressman with soulful, caring blue eyes often forgets himself and opens the door for the female security detail that is there to protect him. They smile at his habitual instinct, though some may question whether, in this day and age, his good manners are still politically correct.

But Congressman Steny Hoyer, a devout Baptist and veritable gentleman of days gone by, says he doesn't care if it's politically correct. "It's just simply correct," he says. Nonetheless, that hasn't precluded some women from closing the door in their own faces, as did Nancy Pelosi, the first female Speaker of the House, when she tried to strong-arm party members to support John Murtha as Majority Leader instead of Hoyer. The Democrats of the 110th Congress, regardless, elected Hoyer, who won 149 to 86, a door-slaming victory that he had long earned, not strong-armed. Indeed, it has been said that where Pelosi leads with "an iron fist," Hoyer leads with a velvet glove.

And it is with that soft "glove" that Hoyer, the Maryland representative, has reached out—with a strong enduring handshake of friendship and solidarity—to the Jewish state. Through resolution after resolution on the House floor, he has proven his commitment and respect for America's only democratic ally in the Middle East, Israel. In September 2007, he unabashedly criticized Representative Jim Moran for suggesting that AIPAC (American Israel Public Affairs Committee) "has pushed [the Iraq] war from the beginning." With his track record of unwavering support, he deserves to be heard when he rejects the premise that President Bush is the best friend Israel has ever had in the White House.

"For decades the Democratic Party has been committed to protecting Israel's sovereignty, and that will not change," Hoyer says. "I believe that being engaged in Israel's affairs is more helpful to her than the lack of engagement we have often seen from President Bush." Hoyer believes it is very useful to have a third party assist, not force, a resolution. "The next president will have to be much more engaged in trying to bring peace."

But Hoyer doesn't view the potential for peace with the same starry-eyed perspective as the previous Democratic-led administration. He believes it's pos-

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friendly solutions

sible, but that the likelihood of a peaceful resolution between the Israelis and the Palestinians is dimmer than it was a few years ago. He is not sure if there is currently a Palestinian leader who can bring his people to it. "I believe that Mahmoud Abbas considers peace and stability as the only alternative," he says. "But Hamas still harbors the hope of expelling Israel from the Middle East through whatever means it believes will be successful."

Learning from the lessons of failed peace initiatives, Hoyer says that courageous and commanding leadership on both sides of the conflict is needed. "I firmly believe that the majority of Israelis and Palestinians want peace," he says. "The challenge for leaders is to convince those who do not want peace that they will win in peace and must stop working against it."

Hoyer's understanding of the Middle East isn't gleaned from his safe haven in Washington, D.C. He has participated in 10 trips to Israel and the Middle East and has led the largest Congressional delegation to Israel in its history with the goal of further understanding and learning about the issues firsthand and seeking ways to resolve them. "Sadly, the security of Israel is threatened not only by extremists and fanatics in the West Bank and Gaza," Hoyer has explained in the past, "but, as well, by entire populations in the Middle East who are infected with an obsessive hatred of Israel, who embrace terrorism, and who seek the most lethal weapons in human history." And where many are quick to point to Israel as the cause of the troubles in the Middle East, Hoyer is quick to point elsewhere. "I do not think that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is the cause for all the problems," he feels. "It has been used by those who are not interested in peaceful reconciliation of differences to inflame their constituencies

and recruit radicals to their causes."

Though Hoyer believes in a two-state solution, he is not one to be fooled by a game of semantics and confuse the murderers of innocent men, women, and children with freedom fighters. "Freedom fighters do not send their youth to their deaths as homicide bombers. Terrorists do!" Hoyer will never forget talking to an Israeli father who said that he puts gas masks in his children's book bags every day because he can never be sure



Photo courtesy of Steny H. Hoyer

Hoyer with Israeli president Shimon Peres.

when an attack might come. He was also touched when he met with Karnit Goldwasser, the wife of captive Israeli soldier Udi Goldwasser, who was captured by Hezbollah in July 2006. He thus comes to Israel's full defense in its right to protect itself and its citizens.

"The civilized world must never equate legitimate acts of self-defense by any state with illegitimate, unspeakable acts of terror," he says. Hoyer, who is a widely respected voice on foreign policy and international affairs, tells *Lifestyles* that Israel is clearly the object of criticism for maintaining its security position in the face of hostile threats and actions to which other nations are not subjected. But he is adamant in his

belief that as a free, independent state, Israel has the inherent right of self-defense. "No people on earth have been subjected to more bigotry and violence than the Jewish people. And no people are more in need of a sovereign, secure homeland."

Hoyer believes that Israel is not only hit harshly in the Middle East, but that the war against the Jews is packed up and imported to the United Nations, where Israel's laundry is aired with unequalled censure. Hoyer acknowledges that the United Nations General Assembly continues to single out Israel for unfair and discriminatory treatment and that no other country receives such intensive and unfair treatment. "Anti-Zionism is still antisemitism, no matter how it's cloaked," the congressman has said regarding the UN. "And we must expose it, condemn it, and exorcise it from the international body politic." He was glad to congratulate Israel for recently being chosen to chair a UN committee for the first time in its history.



After spending time speaking with Hoyer, it's easy to forget that at the end of the day, and at the beginning of it, he is a politician. His affable, honest laugh, his warmth and lack of affectation, his accessible manner and gripping smile, his elegant but down-to-earth composure are all so inviting, comforting, and spellbinding. One feels that one is in the presence of a close friend rather than a could-be president. Perhaps it is because of these charms, in addition to a stalwart record of accomplishment, that Hoyer has become the longest-serving member of the U.S. House of Representatives from Maryland in history. He is now serving his 14th term. He has earned a first-class reputation as a strong leader and a skilled legislator. "Congressional insiders roundly

agree that [Steny Hoyer] is a workhorse with the ability to focus on getting a job done that is unmatched by many lawmakers," the *National Journal* writes. As for his constituents, Hoyer is so well liked that when a promising newcomer, Ron Miller, filed to run against Hoyer in the last election, Republican Party leaders talked him out of it, deeming it a waste of money. Hoyer went unchallenged.

Steny Hamilton Hoyer was born in New York City in 1939 and grew up in Forestville, Maryland. Even as a young teen in junior high school, his political interests engaged him in student politics. He had long dreamed of going to Princeton but couldn't afford it and ended up attending the University of Maryland, which, he says, is the best thing that ever happened to him other than marrying his beloved wife, Judy. In 1963, Hoyer graduated magna cum laude and later earned his J.D. from Georgetown University Law Center in Washington, D.C., in 1966. But his academic life didn't start off with grades that launch one into success. He did very poorly his first two semesters of college. By the third semester, Hoyer dropped out. That might have been the end of his education, but for the day a man came to the school in a convertible to address the students at an assembly. Hoyer debated whether or not he should attend the speech and opted at the last minute to go. The speaker was John F. Kennedy. Hoyer's life was changed forever. "He made a huge impact on my life," Hoyer recounts.

The next week, the yet-to-be congressman switched majors from business to political science.



With politics carving a new path for him, Hoyer interned for Senator Daniel Brewster (D-MD), along with current Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi. And while juggling his studies and an after-school job with demanding hours, Hoyer still managed to pull off a 3.8 average—

his journey to making this country and this world a better place had begun. Today, a bust of JFK, which Hoyer's mother gave to him as a gift, shares the Majority Leader's office. (After all, even in politics, two heads are better than one.)

By the age of 27, he won a seat in the Maryland Senate and just several years later, at the age of 35, was elected president of the Senate, the youngest ever in state history. He served in that body until 1978. Hoyer then wanted to run for governor but wound up joining Acting Governor Blair Lee III's ticket as his running mate. They lost by 20,000

votes in the primary. He also was a member of the State Board of Higher Education from 1978 to 1981, the year in which he came to Congress after winning a special election that was called to replace Congresswoman Gladys Noon Spellman, who had suffered a stroke and remained in a coma until her death. His victory in the primary election and then in the general election earned him the nickname "boy wonder."

didate recruiter for House Democrats from 1995 to 2000. In 2002, he was unanimously elected by his colleagues in the Democratic Caucus to serve as the House Democratic Whip, the second-highest-ranking position among House Democrats.

In Congress, Hoyer has built a reputation as a defender of federal employees and a leader on education and human and civil rights issues. He was also the lead House sponsor of the Help America Vote Act, which President Bush signed into law on October 29, 2002, and the lead House sponsor of the



Photo courtesy of Steny H. Hoyer

(l-r) Congressman Steven Roth (D-NJ), *Lifestyles* Contributing Editor Aliza Davidovit, Steny Hoyer, and NORPAC President Dr. Ben Chouake.

Hoyer served as chair of the Democratic Caucus, the fourth-ranking position among House Democrats, from 1989 to 1994 as well as Deputy Majority Whip from 1987 to 1989. He is the former co-chair and a current member of the Democratic Steering Committee. He was also the chief can-

Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990.

Now serving as House Majority Leader, Hoyer is charged with managing the House floor as well as the scheduling of legislation to be considered. He also plays a key role in helping House Democrats determine their legislative agenda and political strategy, building support for the party's positions, and delivering the Democratic message both in Washington and nationally.



As Hoyer looks back on his long career, he tells *Lifestyles* that what he misses most of days gone by is "having leisure time, and having time to cut my lawn." But what Hoyer misses most of all is his beloved wife, who, he says, undoubt-

edly contributed to his success. Judy Hoyer died of cancer in 1997. “She gave me maturity, stability, and focus,” says Hoyer, who has never remarried. “I was more mercurial.” He says that if he could speak to her once more, he would reiterate to her how she made all the difference in his life. Together they had three daughters. In the face of his great loss, Hoyer found strength in his belief in God. “My faith instructs me that we don’t understand everything that happens,” he shares. “But we have to have confidence that we can move not only beyond bad things that happen, but also through them. Judy Hoyer suffered from epilepsy and to this day the Epilepsy Foundation of America pays yearly tribute to her. Hoyer, himself, has been an advocate for research of this medical ailment,

ship today, he notes the remissness toward international consensus building. “It is difficult to find a world leader who transcends his/her national identity and seeks to establish cooperation and unity as well as compromise and reconciliation between nations,” he says.

But the 68-year-old Maryland representative whose eyes twinkle with youthful enthusiasm is a forward-looking optimist who believes change is always possible and is frequently quoted as saying, “You can’t live life by looking in the rearview mirror.” His thinking is much like that of his idol, JFK, who believed, “Change is the law of life. And those who look only to the past or present are certain to miss the future.” Those sentiments are consistent with the answer Hoyer gave

And while his job is primarily to make this country a better place, Hoyer also expresses that Jewish Americans have contributed to this country as well. In a speech on Jewish Heritage Month, Hoyer said American Jewry has “become a vital part of our society, enriching both our culture and our history.” To *Lifestyles* he says that the contributions of America’s Jewry have been extraordinary in every field—economics, humanitarianism, values, and politics. “American Jews like Henry Kissinger, Alan Greenspan, Arthur Miller, and Gloria Steinem have shaped and improved our society. In fact, I often remark that American Jews have been some of the most effective and outspoken advocates of the values that make America such a special country: freedom of

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and in 2002 the Epilepsy Foundation presented him with its Congressional Leadership Award.

Hoyer has certainly been a leader worthy of commendation. And though he can often be impatient and hard on himself when he doesn’t perform with the perfectionism he aspires to, he has learned in his roles of leadership that to be successful one must appeal to people’s best nature. “Appealing to people’s self-interest is effective,” Hoyer says, “but appealing to their higher instincts is more satisfying.” And in appealing to his own higher instincts as well, he has come to learn that his own opinion of his actions is ultimately more important than the opinions of others. With that confidence in his fight for right, he has become known and respected for being a consensus builder. In fact, when commenting on what quality is missing in world leader-

Lifestyles when he was asked what other historic time he would have liked to have lived in in order to redress an historic wrong.

“I don’t know if I would choose another time,” Hoyer says. “Every time had its opportunities to speak up for your beliefs and to confront racism, antisemitism, bigotry, and prejudice. Every time had its time for one to speak up and invest in the future of this country, and the world.”

And speak up he has. Hoyer has championed the cause of human rights, individual freedoms, democracy, and religious liberties around the globe. He called for decisive U.S. and NATO action to stop the carnage throughout the former Yugoslavia, and condemned the repressive tactics of the Taliban, Afghanistan’s former ruling regime, and urged action against genocide in Sudan, just to mention a few of his initiatives.

speech, freedom of religion, promotion of opportunity and equality, and a commitment to tolerance of diversity and difference.”



The time allotted for the interview has come to an end and Hoyer apologizes for having to return to work, perhaps not realizing how much of himself he has already shared. Of course the congressman opens the door for me. As we exit, JFK’s bust watches over protectively, a silent witness to the “wonder boy” he set in motion almost 50 years ago and the “wonder man” he has become. And as I recollect Kennedy’s historic words “Ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country,” I realize that it’s time for me to let the gracious congressman get back to work. [lifestyles](#)