



Podcast Transcript

The Cloakroom with Peter Roskam: Featuring Congressman Steny Hoyer, D-MD

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Rubenking: Welcome to The Cloakroom with Peter Roskam. Former Congressman Peter Roskam leads BakerHostetler's Federal Policy team. Through interviews with leading members of Congress, Peter provides an insightful firsthand view into the latest policy and political debates on Capitol Hill. In today's episode of The Cloakroom with Peter Roskam, Peter interviews Congressman Steny Hoyer, a Democrat from Maryland. Peter and Congressman Hoyer talk about the institution of Congress, how it's changed in recent years, and ways to ease the partisan gridlock that has largely seized Capitol Hill. Let's listen in to The Cloakroom with Peter Roskam.

Roskam: I sat down with Congressman Steny Hoyer in his office for his perspective on today's Congress. After all, he arrived on Capitol Hill during Ronald Reagan's first term and has served through every president since. But he's got an interesting back story, which I asked him to share. His insights are valuable because he served as House Majority Leader twice. In other words, he's seen a thing or two.

Congressman Steny Hoyer, thank you for your hospitality and for working us in on a busy day today. I really, really appreciate your time. I was reviewing your resume last night as you could expect that I would, and one of the things that impressed me was how quickly you got into public life. As a very young man, coming right out of law school and winning your first seat in the Maryland Senate, what was it that prompted you to get at this so aggressively so early?

Hoyer: Well, Peter, I've got a corny story that I'll tell you. It is a good story, but it is a little bit corny. I went to the University of Maryland. I wanted to go to Princeton and didn't have any money, got offered a scholarship to Lafayette, which is a junior Ivy League school, didn't have enough money. They gave me a scholarship, but I couldn't make the difference, so I went to Maryland, commuted. And I thought going to Maryland was a step down for me, which turned out to be now the third best thing that's happened to me in life. Marrying my first wife was the first, marrying my second wife was the second. But I did poorly. I was an 18-year-old kid, didn't have it together. And I tell this story both to 18-year-olds who aren't doing so well and to their parents. So, I made a 1.7 my first semester. I thought that was pretty good, so I rested and got a 1.0 my second semester. My third semester, I dropped out. And I was working at CIA from 3:30 to 12:00 at night. And the fourth semester, which should have been my second sophomore semester, I went back and I've told myself, look. If you're going to make anything of yourself, you better start settling down. But I still didn't really have it together.

And then we have spring convocation in late March or early April of 1959, and classes were off from 11:00 to 1:00. And I had a history class. I came out of the building and was walking up the hill that went both to the student union and one building past the arena where the speaker was going to address us. But I thought, I'll just go have lunch, a little later I'll have to get to work. And driving by me in a 1958 Pontiac convertible, and I recognized him, it was the speaker. So, I said that is cool, meaning a 1958 Pontiac convertible. And so, I said, I'm going to go hear him speak. So, I went and heard him speak. He gave a speech that I think he probably gave on hundreds of campuses. And I think probably like an awful lot of young people, I was inspired by his message of service, of involvement, not necessarily being in politics, but of involvement. And so, that semester, matter of fact, the next week, I changed my major from a business major to a political science major.

Roskam: I love it.

Hoyer: Do you know who that speaker was?

Roskam: Who?

Hoyer: 1959, spring, guess.

Roskam: John Kennedy.

Hoyer: John Fitzgerald Kennedy.

Roskam: Come on. Hence the memorabilia around us.

Hoyer: Yeah. He changed my life. It was like a road to Damascus experience. I made 3.8 that semester.

Roskam: Son of a gun.

Hoyer: Graduated with high honors, got admitted to Georgetown Law School, and five months out of Georgetown Law School, three years later, I ran for the state Senate and was elected.

Roskam: So, you graduated in the spring, and you're elected that November. How did you do that? I mean, how do you put a campaign together like that? That is remarkable.

Hoyer: Well, I ran on a ticket with a guy from my county who was one of my predecessors who had been, but he was an at-large member of Congress because when they did redistricting, they'd been having trouble. So, they have one at-large member, and he was the at-large member. His name was Carlton Sickles. And he was running against the establishment candidate, a guy named Tom Finan, whose son was a very close friend of mine, and he was a good friend of mine, but I turned the Sickles campaign down twice. I said I wanted to run for the House of Delegates. He said no, we want you to run for the state Senate. I had no money. My family had never been in politics. I was living, I was married. We'd had our first child in 1964. My wife was a teacher. And I, as you heard, I was, by that time I was working for a United States Senator, whose name was Daniel Brewster, from our state. And so, the third time they asked me and said, look, we really want you involved, and we'll give you resources, etcetera. And you don't believe people when they recruit you, _____.

Roskam: That is for sure.

Hoyer: I learned that lesson very early. Yeah, but it was a state Senate district. It was about 250,000 people. And the advantage I had, I had just gotten out of law school, just gotten out of University of Maryland three years before that and had gone to high school in the district in which I was running, which meant I had a lot of young people I could involve in a campaign.

Roskam: Sure.

Hoyer: So, we knocked on doors, July, September. It was a September primary. So, July, August, and September, about 70 days, we knocked on 25,000 doors. We knocked on every door. This is 1966. We had no computer printout saying X is a Democrat, that X voted or whatever. So, we just knocked on every door. It was a suburban, and in some parts of it, pretty densely populated, so you could do a lot. And we did six days a week from 10:00 in the morning till 6:30, 7:00 if we had an event, or till dark. And I spent \$8,000 total primary in general. We didn't have any money.

Roskam: Son of a gun. Unbelievable.

Hoyer: Now, \$8,000 was a lot more than it is today, but nevertheless, to think, go run for the state Senate and spend \$8,000, people would think they're crazy.

Roskam: And you put it together just basically exploded with energy.

Hoyer: With energy. And we, I came downtown, and the buses that are filled up by federal employees here, they go, were going to that district. I'd shake their hands at 11.

Roskam: Here? As they're going out? Oh, that is good.

Hoyer: And give them a piece of paper so they could read it on the, and we did that not so much on the coming because it was more dispersed at that time, and you had to wait for the bus and all, so. But when they were leaving, they were all lined up. So, you'd give it to them as they were going on the bus.

Roskam: Well, you had to be a natural because within a couple of terms you were elected president of the state Senate, the youngest person in Maryland history to do that.

Hoyer: I, timing is so important, now.

Roskam: Timing and talent, I mean.

Hoyer: Well, you've got to be talent. But you've also got to be lucky in terms of timing that the president of the Senate was a guy named Bill James for the first eight years I was there, four-year terms, first eight years and he decided to leave. And I was at that point in time, chairman of my delegation that had four other, or five. So we were one of the largest delegations. And so, and they all supported me and had a lot of other younger members supporting me. And timing. Now, you're right. I mean, you have to be able to take advantage of what timing offers you, but if he decided to stay, I would not have been president of the Senate.

Roskam: So, you showed up here in 1981 in the special election.

Hoyer: I ran for lieutenant governor with the incumbent governor, acting governor in 1978. He was a wonderful person and would have been a good governor, but he was not a good candidate. And in Maryland, you run as you do president, vice president, paired. So, the county we won biggest was mine, but we lost. And so, I practiced law for a couple of years, and then my predecessor, a woman named Gladys Spellman, had a cardiac arrest in the October 30, 1980, parade, Halloween parade. And she went into a coma, and she never got out of the coma. Sad to have lived 7 1/2 years in a coma, sadly, for her family and for herself, but a strong woman. And so, Tip O'Neill declared the seat vacant in January, declared a special election. And so, I ran in the special election in 1981, which is essentially February, so, the middle of February to May election essentially about 10 weeks or less, 6 or 7 weeks for the primary and 6 or 7 weeks for that.

Roskam: So, here is what that means. That means you showed up here at the very beginning of Ronald Reagan's first term, and you've served with seven presidents through Joe Biden and will surely serve with an eighth. You've also, as I was looking at this last night because I've got Steny Hoyer on my mind. You've seen the majority flip five times and maybe a sixth.

Hoyer: That I did not know. So, thank you for that.

Roskam: Okay, come on, I'm here all week. So, give, can, the big question and you hear this all the time from folks at home, you hear it from all kinds of people. They're hungry to know, how do we get back to a pathway in Congress that is more steady, that is more able. I was looking. You had, you worked with George H. W. Bush on the Americans with Disabilities Act. You were deeply involved with that. I, look, you're involved in the Help America Vote Act, another landmark piece of legislation and these are just a couple of them.

So, this environment that we're in right now, Steny, it is really hard to imagine that that is possible right now. There are members on both sides of the aisle that are performers and are not serious legislators, and I'm not asking you to criticize your colleagues. I'll do that. What I'm asking you to do is to reflect. How do you think we got here, number one, and as you contemplate the future of what Congress can look like. Going back to your inspiration, where, I mean, think about that, a transformational moment where a public figure essentially looked you in the eye as a young guy and as you described it a couple of minutes ago, changed your life. How do we get back to that level of inspiration? So, how do you think we got here first of all?

Hoyer: Well, first of all, on the latter point you made, I'm not sure that we haven't had moments like that. I am sure that you can find a million young black people, men and women, who were equally inspired by Barack Obama.

Roskam: Fair point.

Hoyer: So, I think we haven't lost that. Kennedy was a particularly inspirational figure. Jack Kemp. You weren't here when Kemp was here, but you knew Jack. Jack was equally inspired by Jack, by John Kennedy.

Roskam: Interesting.

Hoyer: He and I talked about that, and he went to the Republican Party, I was in the Democratic Party, but equal inspiration from a charismatic and very articulate speaker who could motivate people. How we got here? Politics has always been a rough game. You ask Thomas Jefferson, it was a rough game. You ask Abraham Lincoln, it was a rough game. Franklin Roosevelt, it was a rough game.

Roskam: That is right.

Hoyer: Ronald Reagan. Not so tough for him. He was a figure respected by almost everybody because he had values, and you could disagree with him and not be disagreeable or not dislike him. It is difficult to assess this as one person's, because it is not. America became more coarse over the years. Newt Gingrich came to the Congress in 1978. At that point in time, the Republicans were led by, I think, one of the most decent human beings that I've ever met and who I became very close to, Bob Michel from your state.

Roskam: From my home state.

Hoyer: Peoria. And he and I became good friends, but Gingrich came in 1978 and in 19, I don't know when he said it, '78, '79, somewhere in there, he told his party and eventually told the public and his Republican colleagues all of it. If we continue to work hand in glove with the Democrats, even though we disagree with them and we go, but we lose, but we lose with a degree of cooperation. Gingrich's premise was there is no reason for the American people to change. So, what we have to do, we need to bring the Democrats down. And for the next 16 years, he proceeded to do that, including Bob Michel, who he forced out in 1994.

Roskam: And Jim Wright.

Hoyer: Jim Wright, very tough on Jim Wright. Ironically, after he went after Jim Wright for presumably profiting from a book that he wrote. Gingrich did the same thing with Murdoch.

Roskam: Came back to haunt him.

Hoyer: And it came back to haunt him. But nevertheless, Gingrich's premise proved to be right in the sense that we hurt ourselves. Wright, _____, others, who did things that in their time would not have been questioned, but it was not their time, it was a reformed time. It was a more sensitive time to ethics and propriety. And Gingrich just beat on that. And that the Democrats are corrupt, the Democrats are lying, the Democrats, the Super Liberals are selling you out as a country. And that mentality became, I think, by too many, perceived as that is the way you do politics. Dick Gephardt called it character assassination. The politics of character assassination. And Gingrich had perfected that.

Now, he could not have done that if the environment of the country had also not become more polarized. So, I mean, you can't blame him alone, but he was taking advantage and adding to that polarization and to the belief not that the other side was just wrong. But the other side was immoral and unworthy.

Roskam: That is where it gets really tough, and it becomes actually oppositional. So, what I've noticed is the ability to take yes for an answer, for example, to negotiate. If we were to come in and sit down and go through some, any of these landmark bills that you were involved in, there is some level of negotiation and back and forth. And the ability to let your opponent take a victory lap and take some credit for something becomes very, very difficult because if you do it, then you're a sellout. You're, you've lost your way. And now the Balkanization with all of this media makes this environment really, really tough.

So, let me just tell, just give you an observation. So, I came, I was a staffer in the mid-80s and I worked for Henry Hyde. And I remember hearing your name because it is an unusual name, and I remember seeing you one time. You would never, we didn't even have a conversation, but I remember seeing you by the Capital South Metro Station for some reason, and your name and your demeanor always stuck with me. So, I always felt this level of connection with you, even though you have no, there was no connection. But it was just as an aside, I always think of you when I'm on the Capital South Metro.

Hoyer: Aren't you something.

Roskam: Alright.

Hoyer: Well, there was some connection.

Roskam: What is that?

Hoyer: Henry Hyde and I were both Sigma Chis.

Roskam: Oh, well, there you go. He was at Georgetown. And you were too.

Hoyer: No, I was in Maryland.

Roskam: Oh, you were at Maryland.

Hoyer: No, I went undergrad, I was at Maryland, law school, Georgetown. And Henry Hyde and I, now, of course, had disagreements. But Henry Hyde was, he was proud of the institution, and he was not one to tear down the institution or his opponents. He agreed vigorously. He was extraordinarily, as you know, articulate and smart. And he was a good friend of mine.

I remember he went on a Helsinki Commission trip, and the Republicans were in charge, and therefore he was the chairman. But I've been chairman of it. He yielded to me the whole time through. And he couldn't have been more gracious. He was a wonderful human being. Now, he was to the right of Michel, but he had the same appreciation for being a member of an organization that had to work together to make America better.

Roskam: When I was interacting with him because he helped me, he endorsed me, he helped me clear a primary field, helped me in the general election and the whole thing. And Steny, I was visiting with him as a prelude to the campaign, and it was just the two of us. I'm in his office. It is in the District and we're talking about Congress. And he looked at me with an urgency in his eyes, and he said, Peter, this is important work. And then he said it again, it is important work. And this was not the whimsy of an old man, I mean or just a throwaway line. He was trying to communicate to a successor how important the institution was and its deep role in history. He was really a grounded person. So, you're an institutionalist?

Hoyer: And he was. The answer is yes. The House, you, I don't know whether you remember Congressman Natter who was the chair of the Labor Health Committee, subcommittee. Natter? Maybe I'm misstating that. But in any event, who used to get up, and he'd say, this is the people's bill. And his point was, this is about the people. And we are closest to the people. Every two years, they have to rehire us. People talk about, you're here forever. Well, that is because they keep hiring you. That is the only way you stay there. Every two years, your contract is up.

And what Henry Hyde was saying to you, he knew what I know. That if we had more Peter Roskams in the Congress, we would have a more functional Congress that respected one another from either side of the aisle and who wanted to achieve results. People ask me, Peter, what is the difference, or some people allege that the Freedom Caucus and the Squad are the same. If that were the case, we would not have been with a four, same four vote majority, been able to accomplish in the 117th Congress, extraordinary agenda. Agree or disagree, it was a historical achievement, historic achievement. And it was because the difference is the Freedom Caucus, for the most part, believes in losing, they win. And the fact that we do not accomplish something they have accomplished because they believe largely that what you do is bad. The Squad, quite the contrary, they want to accomplish things. They may want to accomplish it more, faster, differently, but they want to get things done so we could pass rules. You can't pass rules. _____ you, the Republicans. You can't pass any fiscal bill through the House of Representatives. Every time we've done the debt limit, we've done CR, we've done the omnibus, whatever.

Roskam: All bipartisan.

Hoyer: It is all bipartisan, and we get, sometimes we get the majority of Republicans, sometimes we get 40% of the Republicans.

Roskam: Before we go, let me ask you this. I was on the House floor when the Prime Minister of Israel, Benjamin Netanyahu, was in. I saw you there. You were an enthusiastic supporter at many times as I was observing you.

Hoyer: I'm an enthusiastic supporter of Israel. He is their leader at this point in time.

Roskam: Fair point. Where are we going? What is the state of play?

Hoyer: On Israel?

Roskam: Yeah, on Israel and everything here.

Hoyer: Peter, I'm a very strong supporter of Israel. I'm telling people, I'm maybe going to give a speech not too long from now. I said in Chicago at the convention, at a party, that one of the leaders of APAC put on. I said, people are talking about a permanent ceasefire. Excuse me. I said Israel has been waiting for a permanent ceasefire for 76 years.

I think much of the reaction is uninformed reaction to what Israel did in response to October 7, a horrific act, that if done in the United States would, we would have lost 40,000 lives. Similar proportions. I was, I met with Ariel Sharon as Prime Minister on August 15, 2005. Now, why do I bring up that day? Because at 12 midnight on August 16 was when Israel vacated Gaza. And they did so forcibly. They made Jewish residents of Gaza leave at the, with the IDF making sure they did leave.

Roskam: Enforcing it.

Hoyer: So, they made a determination. Okay, fine, we don't want to be in Gaza. You don't want us there. Palestinians, the PA at that point in time, is who they thought they were turning it over to. As you know, two years later, Hamas, in effect, kicked Palestinian authority out of Gaza. But I believe that Hamas's only express intent is to kill Jews and destroy the state of Israel. Israel should not be thought to require them to tolerate tens, hundreds, thousands of rockets in the last 20 years coming from Gaza into. Now, it so happens the massacre, the horrific, criminal event that occurred, murders, rapes, children being murdered but they have been under assault continuously since Hamas took over. And Hezbollah, now raining many rockets but have been raining rockets continuously over the last 15, 20 years. We would not stand for that if it came from Mexico or Canada. Mexico and Canada would not exist.

Israel has to remove Hamas. Hamas tactics were a violation of international law that is placing offensive weaponry in civilian areas, schools, hospitals, community centers, shopping centers, etcetera. And I asked people, what was Israel's option? To leave them there? To have them continue to rain rockets down on their people that they were responsible for protecting? In Sderot, which is just a mile from Gaza in southern Israel, the gymnasium, the play area for kids, is a bomb shelter.

Roskam: I've seen it.

Hoyer: Yeah. And so, I'm frustrated that people do not understand why Netanyahu, and I don't agree with Netanyahu. They should not have settlements in the West Bank. The U.S. policy is no settlements. Settlements are undermining the ability of the Palestinians to have their place and also many of the settlers are radicals and commit criminal activities against Palestinians. It is a destabilizing function which Smotrich and Gvir, who are members of Netanyahu's cabinet, rationalize and promote. So, I believe that Israel's policy is an understandable policy given from 1948, the establishment, to today. Some of the Arab people have still not accepted the presence of Israel and believe that it ought to be eliminated. Now, that is not the Abraham Accords, Donald Trump affected that, was a very, very positive move forward.

I think the attack of October 7 was an attempt to undermine the Saudi normalization of relations with Israel, which will help stabilize the region. And I also believe that we have to have a two-state solution when Gvir, Smotrich, and Netanyahu say that is not possible. You cannot put your enemy in a corner and say you have no options, because then your enemy has no option but to fight to try to survive.

So in any event, when I said I know Netanyahu well, I've been to Israel 20 times starting in '76. I've been there every decade since the 70s. I have great admiration for the resiliency, the courage of the Israeli people, and for the abilities of the Israeli people. They've been extraordinarily talented and successful in creating a miracle really, out of a desert. So, yes, I was there. I was enthusiastic about supporting Netanyahu's premise that we have to eliminate Hamas because we cannot tolerate on our borders, an entity, not a country, but

an entity that says their objective is to kill Jews and destroy our nation. We cannot tolerate that.

Roskam: Well, Steny Hoyer, you've been generous with your time today, and I'm really, really appreciative you've taken us from a spark in your eye from looking at JFK all the way up to today, the most current issues, and giving us a perspective all the way in between. And so, I'm glad you're in Congress. I'm glad you're running again. And I really, really appreciate your time today.

Hoyer: Peter, let me respond. I'm not glad you're not in the Congress. Very frankly, I'm glad that Sean Casten is because he votes on our team, we become the majority. But your service in Congress as a Republican was what we need. You voted with your party, I don't know 70, 80% of the time, probably, maybe higher than that, but my perception of you is always somebody who was trying to think of what is in the best interest not of your party but of the country and of your people. And we need to have all people in the Congress have that as their central theme. And they can be very conservative. Henry Hyde was pretty conservative. Steve Womack, I don't know whether you know Steve. Steve is and I are very, very close. Jake Ellzey from Texas, conservative, Republican Congressman. We're very close. Why? Because we share the value of trying to reach compromise and move forward.

Roskam: Yeah, that is what it's got to be all about.

Hoyer: And that is what you do, and I'm sorry you're not with it. Not sorry.

Roskam: I get it. Thank you, Steny. It is great to be with you. Appreciate it.

Hoyer: Thank you very much. Been great to be with you, Peter. Good luck to you.

Roskam: Thanks for listening. If you've got a suggestion or a comment for me, shoot me an e-mail, and to get the latest episode, please subscribe and share it with your friends.

Rubenking: Thank you, Peter and Congressman Hoyer. If you have any questions for Peter, his full contact information is in the show notes. As always, thanks for listening to BakerHosts and The Cloakroom with Peter Roskam.

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