

Internet Sees a Clapback in Nancy Pelosi's Applause of Trump

By Yonette Joseph

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Video and images of Speaker Nancy Pelosi applauding President Trump's call for bipartisan cooperation at the State of Union became a viral meme. Doug Mills/The New York Times

The speaker of the House, Nancy Pelosi, stands behind President Trump at his State of the Union address on Tuesday night, she a vision in suffragist white, head tilted just so, lips pursed in a smirk and arms outreached.

Her hands come together in what [one Twitter user](#) called a "walrus clap," but it resonated around the world.

In the image, captured by Doug Mills of The New York Times, and in other pool video footage, the internet saw acres of shade dispensed by a skilled politician firmly in control, and social media users immediately turned Ms. Pelosi's wordless gesture into a viral meme.

Cross-party applause for the president on such a night is normally a pro forma affair, overlooked in the sea of stirring words penned by a speechwriter and recited from a teleprompter.

This time, the House speaker's clapping almost stole the spotlight on an important night for a president seeking to deliver to millions of viewers his delayed speech — a speech she previously blocked.

Ms. Pelosi — Democrat of California, self-described "[mother of five, grandmother of nine](#)" and the first woman to take up the speaker's gavel — was applauding a political sparring partner whom analysts have concluded she had roundly outfoxed twice before.

Many called her gesture a "clap jeer." Some called it a literal clap back. One Twitter user said it was the "[read your tweets](#)" clap, in reference to Mr. Trump's penchant for weaponizing his Twitter feed. The comedian Patton Oswalt congratulated Ms. Pelosi for "inventing" an obscenity without using a certain finger.

Another went so far as to call it "[the photo of the century](#)."

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To find a similarly fraught gender-tinged meme in Washington, one may have to go back to 2017, when “nevertheless, she persisted” [became a rallying cry](#) after the Senate majority leader, Mitch McConnell, tried to muzzle Senator Elizabeth Warren.

Some took offense at the clap, with one person tweeting: “Nancy Pelosi’s sarcastic clap is [a consummate example of the biggest breakdown in American society](#): lack of respect. We don’t have to agree, but we should #respect each other.” And another noted that if her gesture is now the official political clapback, “[We Republicans can use it too.](#)”

Observers accused [Mr. Trump of rushing into his speech](#) on Tuesday and not waiting for the speaker to introduce him, as if out of fear he would not get to talk at all. But Ms. Pelosi later said that he did not break protocol.

During his speech, Mr. Trump said, “Together we can break decades of political stalemate.” But many pundits wondered how long the comity would last.

To understand the rapturous response by the liberal wing of the Twittersphere to the speaker’s moves, it may help to recap how we got here.

Mr. Trump, 72, and Ms. Pelosi, 78, had fierce, public clashes since the 17-term representative returned as speaker in January, after the Democrats wrested back the House in bruising midterm elections last year.

The brewing rancor kicked off again on Jan. 23, when in the middle of the partial government shutdown, Ms. Pelosi [sent a letter to the president](#) suggesting that he delay his State of the Union address, set for Jan. 29, until after the government reopened.

The extraordinary request escalated the partisan battle over Mr. Trump’s demand for more than \$5 billion to build a wall at the border with Mexico.

He retaliated by grounding a military plane that had been scheduled to take Ms. Pelosi and other lawmakers on a fact-finding trip to Afghanistan. When Mr. Trump pressed ahead, insisting he wanted to give the speech, Ms. Pelosi promptly disinvited him. That [sent late-night comedians](#) into a tizzy.

The talk show host Samantha Bee crowed: “Dude, I know it’s driving you crazy that a woman turned you down, but this is the point in your life where you’re actually going to have to learn that no means no. There will be no grabbing *this* podium until Nancy is good and ready.”

As the shutdown dragged on to become the longest on record, 35 days, the consensus was that Mr. Trump had met his match in Ms. Pelosi, so much so that a man known for giving foes insulting nicknames like “Cryin’ Chuck” and for labeling

women “horseface,” “ugly” and “dog” could come up with only one term to refer to Ms. Pelosi: [Nancy](#).

But Ms. Pelosi’s playbook for handling the president was evident back in December, when she and Senator Chuck Schumer, Democrat of New York, [attended a televised Oval Office meeting](#) with the president that went haywire.

In the verbal barrage that followed, the Democrats got Mr. Trump to take ownership of any shutdown that would follow, and Ms. Pelosi snapped: “Mr. President, please don’t characterize the strength that I bring to this meeting as the leader of the House Democrats.”

That [round, too, went to Ms. Pelosi](#), according to political analysts.

Soon afterward, word leaked that in a closed-door meeting with her Democratic colleagues, she had called the wall debate “a manhood thing” for Mr. Trump, likening the meeting to “a tinkle contest with a skunk” and adding, “I was trying to be the mom.”

On Tuesday night, some Twitter users saw echoes of a stern matriarch in Ms. Pelosi’s countenance. She stared at notes in front of her and appeared to roll her eyes and shake her head at some points.

But it was the speaker’s fleeting “bless your heart” expression as Mr. Trump looks back at her — as if for approval — with the clap that had the internet buzzing.

[As one Twitter user wrote](#): “Holy hell that look. When your Mom looks at you like that, don’t walk. Run.”

Christine Pelosi, a political strategist and a daughter of the speaker, [weighed in on the chatter in a post on Twitter](#): “Oh yes that clap took me back to the teen years. She knows. And she knows that you know. And frankly she’s disappointed that you thought this would work.”

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