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## For historic vote on health-care reform, Pelosi wielded potent symbol: The gavel

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There were at least three gavels wielded during the drama of Sunday's marathon health-care debate and vote. Rep. John Dingell lent House Speaker Nancy Pelosi the gavel he used when presiding over passage of Medicare in 1965. Dingell, whose father attempted to pass national health-insurance legislation in 1943, also lent her a super-size gavel, which she carried when House leaders made a very public walk to the House chamber before the vote. And the speaker had a third, crab-mallet gavel she used, minting it as a new historic object to mark the passage of the legislation.

But that second, highly persuasive hammer is very likely the one that will be remembered among the iconic images of Sunday's vote. After an emotional meeting of House Democrats, it was a prop chosen to add levity, a herding-cats gavel to show wayward Democrats that the speaker meant business. Cradling it like a croquet mallet, Pelosi carried it through an often hostile crowd, walking in a phalanx from the Cannon Office Building to the Capitol around noon.

Since Democrats retook control of the House in January 2007, the gavel hasn't been just a symbol of the speaker's power. It has been a particularly volatile image from the moment she was photographed receiving it from John Boehner. The outgoing Republican majority leader wasn't just yielding power after an electoral thumping, he was yielding it to a woman, the first woman to sit only two heartbeats from the presidency. Right-wing blogs frequently use that image, often without explanation, as if it is manifestly obvious that the world is upside down if a woman from San Francisco in a tailored cabernet-colored suit is brandishing the implement.

Pelosi isn't the first to opt for the symbolism of an oversize gavel, and she didn't invent the masculine overtones it seems to carry. When then-Rep. Jim Wright, a Democrat from Texas, became speaker in 1987, he brought with him a Texas-size gavel donated by the speaker of the Texas House, Gib Lewis. Lewis didn't want the newly minted speaker to "use such wimpy little gavels."

Gavels, plural. Unlike the Senate, which replaces its gavel every century or so (the current ivory one is a 1954 gift from India), the House has multiple gavels, many of them the handiwork of Ivan Hache, who produced a few hundred utilitarian hammers about a quarter-century ago, according to Anthony A. Wallis, a research analyst with the House of Representatives Office of the Historian. A large box of them sits under the House

parliamentarian's chair. The House, which gave us Tom "The Hammer" DeLay, does a lot more pounding than the Senate.

Whether it was intended as a provocation or not, Pelosi's very public walk with a large, almost clown-size wooden mallet was red meat to her political foes. But what about its power as political imagery? Will the image implode, as the "Mission Accomplished" photo op did for George W. Bush? Or will it redefine the Democrats as a can-do party after more than a year of seeming disarray?

The choice to schlep it so publicly seems to have been an impromptu bit of symbolism, not nearly so theatrically crafted as Bush's campy May 2003 arrival aboard the USS Abraham Lincoln to announce what he hoped would be -- but certainly was not -- the end of the war in Iraq. But as happens so often with charged political images, there is a latent iconic and historic power that only becomes clear as the future clarifies the present. Gavels aren't just used in the House of Representatives or the Senate. They are more immediately associated with judges and courtrooms. Back when the House, the Senate and the presidency were all in Republican hands, it was judges who were public enemy No. 1 among people inclined to dislike Pelosi's politics. The courtroom gavel was seen as usurping legislative power and making law from the bench, according to critics of so-called judicial activism. The gavel is hardly an innocuous tool among cultural conservatives.

It also seems a strange emblem for the sausagemaking of the legislative process, if one considers its Masonic symbolism. If the Masons of Potomac Lodge No. 5 aren't otherwise using it -- and that's fairly rare these days -- the gavel that George Washington is said to have used during the Capitol's cornerstone-laying ceremony can be seen in the Capitol Visitor Center. Made from wood and marble from the same quarries as the stone of the Capitol, it was often in the hands of presidents back when a cornerstone ceremony was de rigueur and the Masons were the obligatory practitioners of it.

But along with other powerful Masonic symbols -- the square, the level, the trowel and the plumb -- the gavel is associated with solid, even stolid, craftsmanship. Its purpose, says Dean Clatterbuck, secretary of Potomac Lodge No. 5, is to *test* the stone. A tap of the gavel assures that it has been well laid.

Again, the latent meaning turns out to be more provocative than perhaps anyone intended. The gavel symbolizes not just the power to shepherd the legislation, it implies the legislation is well crafted, that the House is building on a solid, considered foundation. It thus lends gravitas to a process that seemed, in the event, a suspenseful, bewildering and sometimes maddening display of improvisation and electoral scrambling.

But it is the power to open and close discussion that will be the most charged element of the image. In that, the gavel, a double-sided hammer, represents the open-endedness of democracy, the need for orderly debate and the need for that debate to end. The gavel moves the republic from talk to action, and ideally, to consensus and progress. But it was

precisely these two things that were still in debate Monday morning. Republicans spoke openly of repealing health-care reform, while Democrats hailed a historic accomplishment.

Pelosi used the Dingell gavel -- the smaller one with its historic association with Medicare -- to conclude the second of the two most important votes on Sunday, the one on reconciliation. The drama was fueled in part by the realization, especially intense among conservatives, that large entitlement programs, once passed, are rarely diminished or repealed. Medicare, like Social Security, is a monolith that's not likely to disappear from the American landscape.

Which raises yet another of the gavel's meanings. This is the auctioneer's tool, too. And if there was a mix of elation and fury Sunday night on the Hill, there was also a profound sense of unease even among many who supported the bill. The gavel, when it comes down on a big sale, isn't just screaming "sold," it's also saying *caveat emptor*.