

POWER TRIP

Whether she's in the White House or the "No-Spin Zone," Ambassador Nancy Soderberg thinks globally, lives locally.

By Kara Pound

Walter Coker

When Nancy Soderberg invites a reporter to her luxury 11th-floor condo in Jacksonville Beach, she offers no guidance about where to park or how to penetrate the Pentagon-like security at the front door. She assumes professionals can figure things for themselves, an expectation doubtless borne of her own experience.

At age 33, Soderberg was thrust into a senior level position in the Clinton administration, a job for which she didn't think she was qualified or had a chance of getting. She got it, and from 1993 to 1997 served as the third-highest ranking official on the United States Security Council, focusing on seemingly intractable problems of war, peace, terrorism and foreign policy.

Nearly two decades later, Soderberg, now 52, remains one of the country's top foreign policy strategists, and is something of a master problem-solver. Though she no longer holds a

coveted White House position, her policies and philosophies are still heard around the world. She's written two books — "The Superpower Myth: The Use and Misuse of American Might" (2005, which included a forward by Bill Clinton), and "The Prosperity Agenda: What the World Wants from America — and What We Need in Return" (2008). She teaches at the University of North Florida, has her own consulting company, has appeared on most media outlets — from "The Daily Show with Jon Stewart" to "The O'Reilly Factor" — and serves as president of Connect U.S. Fund, an alliance of foundations working to promote international cooperation and progressive ideas.

The résumé exudes confidence, as does Soderberg in person. On a recent steamy summer day, Soderberg opens the door to her oceanfront condo and quickly apologizes for running

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late. Blonde, muscular, otherwise put together, she excuses herself to the bedroom to finish getting ready. The condo is brimming with artifacts from her travels — a wooden Dogon door from the Republic of Mali, lamps from China, antiquities from Israel, a beast sculpture from Ivory Coast and soapstone figures from Haiti. The floors are warmed by Oriental rugs, and bottles of red wine with U.S. Customs tags sit in racks in the dining room.

But the walls garner the most attention. Aside from the original artwork, Soderberg has an extensive collection of photos featuring her side-by-side with some of the biggest names in world politics: Pres. Obama, James Carville, Nelson Mandela, Madeline Albright, Pres. Clinton, Al and Tipper Gore, Pope John Paul II and Yasser Arafat. It's company she grew accustomed to keeping, and the rarefied circles of power don't impress her like they once did. But she still recalls her first day at the White House, sitting at her desk in the West Wing, next to the Situation Room, and feeling keenly aware of her youth, gender and perceived inadequacy.

“You grow up thinking that everything revolves around the United States of America. You're just unaware that there are other perspectives.”

“It was like, ‘Oh my God, I'm here,’” she recalls. “For the first couple of months, you expect someone to come and tap you on the shoulder and say, ‘You don't belong here.’” But Soderberg learned to take such challenges in stride.

“And then you get busy, and you realize you can do it — and you can, as long as you're willing to work really, really hard.”

Nancy Elisabet Soderberg was born on March 13, 1958 in Santurce, Puerto Rico, an urban district of San Juan. She and her three siblings moved around a lot — their dad was a civil engineer, and went where jobs took him. Some of the early transitions were scary, Soderberg says, but the

kids eventually got used to being pulled outside of their comfort zone. Her older sister, Sigrid Soderberg Pinsky, concurs.

“Our parents did a remarkable job at making it a positive experience,” she says. “I think it made our family stronger. We were the only people we knew each time we moved. We shared many adventures and experiences together and we're all very secure in our optimism.”

Soderberg describes her adolescent self as a “total jock” — riding horses and taking part in all sports — and to this day, she attributes her self-confidence to being a good athlete. As a kid, Soderberg wanted to be a marine biologist — she secretly hoped to decode dolphin language — but eventually realized she'd be bored sitting in a lab. She graduated from high school in Tulsa, Okla., and attended Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tenn. She studied French and economics, but says the highlight of her undergrad career was the year she spent abroad, studying in France. Not only was she enamored with the culture (she's now fluent in French), it exposed her to an entirely new worldview.

“I remember being amazed that not everybody was fascinated by what the U.S. was doing,” she recalls. “You grow up thinking that everything revolves around the United States of America. You're just unaware that there are other perspectives. It was a revelation.”

The year in France was the beginning of a lifelong passion for exploring foreign cultures (she estimates she's been to every country on Earth except Australia, Iceland, Greenland or anywhere in the Antarctic) but, initially at least, her career path didn't follow along. After graduation, Soderberg got a job at a bank in Boston — a period she describes as the most excruciatingly boring few years of her life. “I can still remember asking this one woman who was a paper-pusher, ‘How long have you been



From a meeting with Nelson Mandela in 1992, shortly after his release from prison. “I was struck by his lack of bitterness,” says Soderberg. “His inner peace was extraordinary.”

doing that?’ She goes, ‘30 years,’ and I'm like, ‘Get me out of here!’”

She did get out. Soderberg applied to graduate school at the Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University, she says with only a vague intention of doing “something international.”

It was 1982 — the start of the Reagan era — and as Soderberg tells it, she had a “pushy” professor who kept urging her to go into politics. She wasn't inclined. “I didn't know if I was a Democrat or a Republican,” she confesses. “I grew up in the '70s, which was Watergate and Jimmy Carter shivering in his sweater in the White House, so it wasn't exactly inspiring. But then I thought about it and thought ... ‘might as well try it.’”

That pushy professor was a young Madeline Albright, who later helped Soderberg get an internship working for Walter Mondale on his 1984 presidential campaign. Mondale lost, of course, and Reagan went on to serve a second term, but Soderberg moved on to work in Sen. Ted Kennedy's office, eventually taking the title of senior foreign policy adviser. Soderberg has never regretted the choice — she considers Kennedy one of the finest politicians and human beings the world's ever seen, and she

worked for him for six years. But at the time, she heard from many who recommended against the job.

“People said, ‘Don't take [a job in] Kennedy's office, because you'll then be targeted a Democrat and no Republican will hire you.’” Soderberg says she “thought about that for about two seconds and said, ‘That's OK.’”

She took a break from the job in '88 to help with Michael Dukakis' presidential campaign, during which she worked closely with a young George Stephanopoulos. When, in September '91, he went to work for the presidential campaign of baby-faced Arkansas Governor Bill Clinton, Stephanopoulos called Soderberg to tell her the campaign needed someone to manage its foreign policy. She didn't want to take the job; she was sure George Bush Sr. was going to win re-election. “He was [at] like 10 percent in the poll,” she says of Clinton. But Sen. Kennedy urged her to do it, and Soderberg eventually agreed. She went to Little Rock and began running the campaign's foreign policy component. To her surprise, Clinton won, and she found herself going to the White House as staff director of the National Security Council. Her responsibilities included day-to-day crisis management, developing U.S. national security policy, handling issues with the press and Congress and briefing the president, for whom she later served as deputy assistant.

“I thought I'd be a marine biologist,” she laughs. “And then I thought I'd save Africa. Then all of the sudden I'm working on campaigns and — poof! — I'm [on] the National Security Council.”

Soderberg's sister remembers the Soderberg family's reaction. “It was surreal and absolutely thrilling,” says Pinsky. “That was such a fun time. We were all huge Clinton supporters and huge Nancy supporters, of course, and oh my gosh, her coattails were just a lot of fun to hang on to.”

During Clinton's first term, Soderberg grew accustomed to a White House life. She was a regular on Air Force One and attended hundreds of important state dinners. Flipping through a photo album filled with pictures taken by the official White House photographer, Soderberg points to a shot of her dressed in an evening



With barefoot Bill on Nov. 5, 1996, the morning after his re-election. Clinton was up all night playing cards, says Soderberg: “Clinton loved Hearts.”



Greeting Yasser Arafat at the White House in September 1995. Soderberg recalls being surprised by his stature. “He was much smaller than I expected.”

Nancy Soderberg ...

On Bill O'Reilly: "I always tease him because he says 'No Spin Zone,' and he's *always* in the spin zone. But it amazes me how many people see that program. That's why I do it — it's just a broader audience. A lot of people watch it. It's good exposure for my books."

On President Barack Obama: "I think he's doing great. He inherited a much larger mess than anybody would have anticipated — in terms of the economy. And that set back everything because I don't think he knew it was going to get as bad as it did so quickly. So that just set everything back. He doesn't have partners. I think for whatever reason the Republicans have decided that they're just going to try and stop anything that Obama wants to do. And so he's been hindered by not having a bi-partisan basis for which to work."

On Senator Ted Kennedy : "He's had more impact on shaping this country's social programs than any other Senator in our history, was the first person to tell me that Bill Clinton would win the 1992 election by shifting the Democratic Party to the left and was always the first to call when anyone on his staff — present or former — is in need. For six years, I had the honor of traveling around the world in his name — and was able to save lives, get people out of jail and work for democratic change."

On being the President of the United States: "I think that the trick is to make sure you get enough sleep, exercise, eat right — the basic rules. And be able to compartmentalize and just get away. But you're going to be tired. It's the hardest job in the world and stuff just happens. You can have the best plan in the world to take the morning off and then something like 9/11 happens and it'll ruin your day. That kinda goes with the territory."

On America's most pressing foreign policy issue: "Afghanistan/Pakistan. We've been in Afghanistan for nine years now. We've let it sort of just fester while we invaded Iraq and the cost of pulling those resources and high-level attention away from Afghanistan — we're paying for it now. My own sense is that Afghanistan is a 20-year development challenge and the only way you're going to leave behind a steady society that's going to resist a resumption to the power of Al Qaeda or Taliban is to build up the education and infrastructure of the system, which is going to take time, money and patience. None of which we have in abundance."

On religion: "I think largely what religion does is provide an enormous source of faith to billions of people around the world. And the leadership of those religions have a responsibility to not misuse them for political gains, which is happening with the extremists today in the Muslim faith and it's happening in the extremes of our Christian faith. It happens in every faith. But I think for the most part, religion is a very personal thing. I don't like it when politicians use religion for their own personal gain. With religion comes a responsibility to not misuse and abuse it."

On her biggest success: "Probably the Irish Peace Process when I was with Clinton. I was in charge of engaging the IRA in the process of getting a negotiated cease-fire. When I went into the office in '93, I was very skeptical of whether or not the IRA was really willing to end the violence and had gotten to be an expert on the issue working for Kennedy. I got there [to the White House] and all of the sudden I was appointed the White House expert on Ireland, which I thought was ridiculous."

On being a woman in the White House: "I was always the youngest person in the room for the most part and also the only woman. I found the only time I really had trouble was when I was trying to get 50-year-old men to do something. I was really young and they just resented it. There's a natural prejudice because it's such a white-old-men-view. But it can also be an advantage because you stand out — everybody remembers who you are, they listen to you, you make it kind of fun, so I loved it."

On staying informed: "I watch the Jon Stewart show almost every night and if I'm up, Stephen Colbert. I read The New York Times and The Florida Times-Union, spend some time on the web — The Washington Post, The Washington Journal. I touch base with the Financial Times, The Economist and NPR."

gown, wearing long gloves. "I remember asking someone about the etiquette of eating while wearing gloves, and a woman behind me — who was also wearing them — explained what was proper. That woman was Oprah."

When Clinton won a second term in '96, Soderberg was appointed UN Ambassador, where she worked on the UN Security Council and became a peacekeeping expert. She still has the title "Ambassador," though she rarely uses it, and considers her greatest achievement to be the peace agreement she helped negotiate in Northern Ireland. But despite her experience in designing peace pacts, Soderberg admits the only thing that makes her uncomfortable is conflict. She laughs, "I don't like arguing with people. I don't like any kind of disagreement. But I'm a negotiator for life, so I've figured out how to address those issues pretty successfully."

One issue Soderberg's not comfortable addressing is her ex-husband. After Clinton's term ended, she moved to Manhattan to run The International Crisis Group, a nonprofit, non-governmental conflict prevention organization. While there, she met and fell in love with Richard Bistrong, a Jacksonville businessman. The couple commuted for a year until they married in 2004 in Nantucket and settled in Northeast Florida. Soderberg worked hard to create a life for herself here — getting involved in the local Democratic Party, making friends and connections and teaching at UNF. Bistrong, meanwhile, was busy as vice president of international sales for Armor Holdings, a former Jacksonville-based company specializing in the manufacture of military, law enforcement and personnel safety equipment.

"I fell in love with someone who lived here, got married and moved down," Soderberg explains. "Then he fell apart. It was a disaster. So I got divorced in 2008."

This past January, Bistrong was arrested and charged with bribing employees at the UN to secure contracts for Armor Holdings, from which he'd been fired in 2007 when British company BAE Systems acquired it. A January story in The New York Times announced the

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arrest: "From 2004 to 2008, Mr. Bistrong was married to Ambassador Nancy Soderberg, a prominent foreign-policy specialist in the Clinton administration who served as a senior representative to the United States mission to the United Nations from 1997 until January 2001 — before any of the events cited in the criminal documents filed against her ex-husband. The object of this latest foreign bribery conspiracy was for Mr. Bistrong and 'his co-conspirators' to increase the company's revenue and enrich themselves by paying bribes to get and keep foreign business, concealing those bribes in the company's books and avoiding the payment of necessary export licenses."

Soderberg declined to comment for The New York Times article, and she declined to comment about the incident for Folio Weekly.

"I'm not going to go there," she says from the couch in her living room. "I'm just not going to get into that. I wish him well. That's all I want to say." (Last week, Bistrong pled guilty to conspiracy, bribing foreign officials and other crimes. He faces five years in prison and up to \$250,000 in fines.)

Bistrong has a son and daughter from a previous marriage, with whom Soderberg



Soderberg greets the Pope in June 1994 during a presidential visit to the Vatican. According to Christianity Today, the pope was later critical of Clinton, saying he seemed more interested in Vatican frescoes than listening to the pontiff.

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Now a visiting scholar at UNF, Soderberg will take students to D.C. to present a paper to senior officials — most of whom are her friends. “I try to teach them that they can have a career in government at levels they never thought they could reach.”

remains close. Asked why she never had children of her own, she scrunches her face and answers matter-of-factly. “Yeah, I just assumed I’d have kids and then somehow it’s like, ‘Oops, I forgot to do that.’ I just never did. I just got really busy.” Instead, she dotes on her eight nieces and nephews.

Over the difficult past few years, she’s found solace in her family. Big sis Pinsky explains, “In our lives, whenever anything happens to any of our family members, everyone’s there. In a heartbeat — whatever anyone of us needs.” Both parents are 82 and the family spends almost every summer together in Nantucket — the place Soderberg feels most at home.

Nancy Soderberg has also turned to teaching, something for which she got a taste in 2004 when she was an adjunct professor at Columbia University’s School of International and Public Affairs. There, she taught a class while writing her first book. Shortly after moving to Jacksonville, Soderberg took a position at UNF as a visiting scholar. She also became director of its Public Service Program, a program which helps students find internships around the world. At the time, she told UNF President John Delaney, “I’m not just going to do this for the rich kids. I want to make it available to everyone.”

This semester, Soderberg’s teaching two courses. Her Monday night class is a large, lecture-style session on global issues in contemporary politics. And her Tuesday afternoon course, the one she’s conducting right now, is an intense submersion in foreign policy, with fewer than 20 students. She’s got her work cut out for her, however.

“Who’s the president of Pakistan?” she asks the diverse group of juniors and seniors. Nobody answers. “These conversations aren’t going to work if you don’t do your readings.”

It’s only the second class of the semester, but this crop of kids may not realize what they’ve gotten themselves into. Along with a heavy workload and reading list, they will be taking an end-of-the-semester trip to Washington, D.C., to present a paper to senior officials — most of whom are Soderberg’s friends. “They’re

nervous,” she says. “They don’t know what to do. I try [to] teach them they can have a career in government at levels that they never thought they could reach” — a lesson Soderberg took straight from Madeline Albright.

Soderberg misses the White House, but not enough to go back. She remains close with Bill Clinton (she was a Hillary supporter in the 2008 presidential primary) and keeps herself busy with local politics — bringing to the area high-profile speakers like Gen. Wesley Clark, Bush administration whistleblower Richard Clarke and Rand Beers, from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, or hosting meet-ups for candidates like Alex Sink and Kendrick Meek.

Travis Bridges, Duval County Democratic Party Chairman, is a close friend and cohort. “Nancy is such a down-to-earth person,” he explains. “She’s just ‘Nancy’ to everyone, rather than being ‘the former United Nations Ambassador.’”

Asked if he thinks she’ll run for local office, Travis says, “In my mind, Nancy would be an ideal senator or congressman. But I don’t think that Nancy is the type of person who would jump into anything unless she feels that she’s ready for it.” Soderberg agrees.

“I’m not going back into [any] administration quite yet,” she says, with a nod to her ex-husband’s legal troubles. “When you go through this kind of trauma and everything like that, it’s good to just kind of let yourself heal for a little bit.”

Beyond that, she observes, policy and politics are different animals. And just because she can negotiate peace treaties doesn’t mean she wants to jump into the partisan divide. “I’m very strong,” she continues, “and you learn to put things in perspective. But I don’t have a thick skin.” □

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To read Nancy Soderberg’s thoughts on Obama, Bill O’Reilly and the most pressing foreign policy issues of the day, go to folioweekly.com.