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California Congressman and Holocaust Survivor Tom Lantos, 80

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Tom Lantos, 80, a California Democrat whose experience as the only Holocaust survivor elected to Congress shaped his strong support for human rights and U.S. military intervention abroad, died Feb. 11 at National Naval Medical Center in Bethesda. He had esophageal cancer.

Rep. Lantos, born in Budapest to Hungarian Jews, served 14 terms in the House of Representatives. His district included southwest San Francisco and much of San Mateo County, where he was known for supporting the socially liberal agenda of his constituents. Last month, he announced he would not seek reelection because of his cancer treatment.

Rep. Lantos was a powerful figure on the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, where he had been the senior Democratic member since 2001 and its chairman since last year.

For years, he sided with Republican conservatives who believe the United States should assert democracy abroad and use the military to intervene when a moral imperative or national interest is at stake. In 2002, he supported the congressional resolution that authorized President Bush to invade Iraq and played a decisive role in gaining Democratic support for the measure.

On the House floor at the time, he noted his own past as a Nazi-resistance fighter during World War II. "Had the United States and its allies confronted Hitler earlier, had we acted sooner to stymie his evil designs, the 51 million lives needlessly lost during that war could have been saved," he said. "Just as leaders and diplomats who appeased Hitler at Munich in 1938 stand humiliated before history, so will we if we appease Saddam Hussein today."

After the Democrats gained control of Congress in 2006, Rep. Lantos became increasingly critical of the direction of the war in Iraq and called for large withdrawals of U.S. troops. He also held more than a dozen hearings on the situation.

Political scientist Bruce E. Cain of the University of California at Berkeley said Rep. Lantos's long alliance with Republicans on the war made him politically vulnerable at home.

"Lantos was able to have a very hawkish position on foreign policy because in every other dimension he was completely in sync with the peninsula constituents," said Cain, who is also executive director of the Washington campus of the University of California system.



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Throughout his tenure, Rep. Lantos was a reliable supporter of Israel in Middle East peace talks and denounced Saudi Arabia for its alleged role in financing terrorists.

Yet he also described himself as "passionately committed to having a dialogue with people we disagree with," including Moammar Gaddafi of Libya. The North African leader long faced U.S. sanctions for his sponsorship of terrorist operations, including the plan that downed Pan Am Flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland, in 1988.

Gaddafi made overtures to the West in the early 2000s, saying he was ready to abandon nuclear, biological and chemical weapons programs. In 2004, Rep. Lantos was among the first members of Congress to visit Libya in decades, and he reported back that it was time to make initial steps toward normalizing relations with Tripoli by lifting the travel ban. (In 2006, the State Department rescinded Libya's designation as a state sponsor of terrorism, leading to further contacts between the two countries.)

Rep. Lantos was co-chairman and founder of the Congressional Human Rights Caucus, a group that highlights human rights violations around the world. Early on, he provided a public platform in the United States for the Dalai Lama by inviting him to Capitol Hill to meet members of the caucus, founded in 1983.

He was also successful in introducing sanctions against the junta in Burma and was recently working on legislation to block importation to the United States of Burmese gemstones, including imperial jade, through intermediary countries. The legislation passed in the House and is now in the Senate.

In 2006, he was among several members of Congress willingly arrested for protesting outside the Sudanese Embassy in Washington to denounce the government's role in the killings in Darfur.

As Foreign Affairs Committee chairman in June, he was pivotal in the House's passage of a resolution pressing the Japanese government to officially apologize for the thousands of women used as sex slaves during World War II. Over the years, he was also an advocate for Taiwan in its tensions with China.

Rep. Lantos was frequently described as having an aristocratic, Old World bearing, and he was also known for scolding those he felt did not measure up ethically.

He targeted independent counsel Donald C. Smaltz, who investigated President Bill Clinton's fundraising practices, for being a registered Republican and likened Smaltz to Kurt Waldheim, the former U.N. secretary general who "conveniently forgot several years when he was a Nazi."

In November, Rep. Lantos sharply rebuked executives of Yahoo, the Internet company, for complying with Beijing authorities in identifying a Chinese journalist and Yahoo account holder. The journalist, whose pro-democracy efforts were considered subversive, received a 10-year prison term.

"While technologically and financially you are giants, morally you are pygmies," Rep. Lantos told the Yahoo officials.

Lantos Tamas Peter was born Feb. 1, 1928. During the Nazi occupation of his homeland, he twice escaped from a forced labor camp in Szob, north of the capital. The second time, he found safety in a Budapest apartment rented by Swedish diplomat Raoul Wallenberg.

Wearing a military cadet uniform, Rep. Lantos used his Aryan appearance -- light hair and blue eyes -- to deliver food and other supplies to Jews in other safe houses Wallenberg rented.

In Congress decades later, Rep. Lantos was credited as a major force behind President Ronald Reagan's decision to award honorary U.S. citizenship to Wallenberg, who vanished after the war while in Soviet custody.

After the Soviets entered Hungary, Rep. Lantos learned that his parents and many other relatives had died.

"The bloodbath, the cruelty, the death that I saw, so many times around me during those few months between March

of 1944 and January of 1945 made me a very old young man," he said in a book accompanying a 1998 documentary about Hungarian American Holocaust survivors, "The Last Days."

In 1947, he won an academic scholarship to study in the United States and received bachelor's and master's degrees in economics from the University of Washington. In 1953, he earned a doctorate in economics from the University of California at Berkeley.

He became an economics professor at San Francisco State University, a business consultant and an international affairs analyst for public television. He also was active in Democratic politics and was an adviser to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee when he ran for the House.

The seat had been held by Leo J. Ryan, a Democrat killed in 1978 in Guyana by members of the American-led Peoples Temple cult shortly before the cult's mass suicide at Jonestown. In 1980, Rep. Lantos won a marginal victory over Bill Royer, a Republican who had won a special election to fill the vacancy caused by Ryan's death.

In 1989, Rep. Lantos led a highly publicized House Government Operations Committee probe into corruption at the Department of Housing and Urban Development. His panel found developers and consultants involved in influence peddling and other forms of abuse with the Section 8 housing program.

Survivors include his wife, Annette Tillemann Lantos, whom he married in 1950, of Burlingame, Calif., and Washington; two daughters, Annette Tillemann-Dick of Denver and Katrina Swett of Bow, N.H.; 17 grandchildren; and two great-grandsons.

In 2002, Rep. Lantos tried to exert his influence to help his daughter Katrina -- the wife of former congressman Dick Swett (D-N.H.) -- win a U.S. House seat in New Hampshire. She lost to incumbent Charles Bass (R), who had defeated her husband in 1994.

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