

Facing their toughest challenge, members of 'the Squad' turned to Pressley for her 'positive, loving tone'

Laura Krantz 9 hrs ago



© Associated Press Representative Ayanna Pressley listened as Federal Reserve Chairman Jerome Powell testified before the House Financial Services Committee on July 10.

WASHINGTON — When the four Democratic congresswomen at the center of the racially charged feud with President Trump faced the cameras, one led them onto the stage and stepped to the microphones to speak first: Ayanna Pressley.

And after all four had made their statements at that Monday news conference and reporters started asking questions, Pressley's three colleagues in what they call "the Squad" — Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Ilhan Omar, and Rashida Tlaib — turned their heads and looked to Pressley, who again stepped up to answer.

"We can sit here and continue to recycle his hateful rhetoric, of which I cannot feign surprise or inflated outrage because he is, if nothing else, predictable," Pressley said of Trump, urging Americans not to take his "bait." "What we are focused on are the hateful policies that are draconian and oppressive and life-threatening and family-separating that [are] being rolled out by this administration every day."

The Boston lawmaker is the most politically experienced of the four outspoken women of color who have shaken up the Democratic Party establishment since arriving in Washington six months ago with the new, diverse House majority. But so far, she's also been the least controversial.

Tlaib said they chose Pressley to speak first because she sets a "positive, loving tone." That was something they felt was needed after Trump declared they should "go back and help fix

the totally broken and crime infested places from which they came.” He also said they hate the United States.

“We wanted her to lead us in taking on the biggest bully probably in our lifetime,” Tlaib said Tuesday in an interview.

Pressley, 45, is the oldest member of the Squad. She worked for former Massachusetts senator John Kerry for 13 years, including as his political director, before making history when she became the first African-American woman elected to the Boston City Council in 2009. In 2018, Pressley stunned incumbent Representative Michael Capuano when she beat him in the Democratic primary.

In Boston, Pressley is known for championing women’s and children issues as well as antiviolence causes. She has used her own personal story as a survivor of sexual assault to highlight that issue as well.

Pressley was elected to the City Council at a time when it was dominated by white men. During her time in office, other women of color were also elected. There are now six women on the 13-member council, including five women of color, one of whom is president.

“She was the tip of the iceberg that totally changed the Boston City Council,” said Erin O’Brien, a political science professor at University of Massachusetts Boston who has followed Pressley’s career.

On the council, Pressley did not have the controversial, outsider reputation she has now earned as part of the Squad. O’Brien said that could be because, as the only woman of color on the council earlier in her career, she did not want to jeopardize her seat.

“I don’t think she had the option to throw bombs in the same way until she was surrounded by other like-minded individuals,” O’Brien said.

Trump’s comments this week come after the four first-term lawmakers have repeatedly criticized him on a range of issues during their short six months in office.

Ocasio-Cortez, of New York, with her huge social media following, is the constant lightning rod of the group with pointed critiques of Trump and his policies.

Omar, of Minnesota, has faced criticism — and charges of anti-Semitism — for her comments about Israel and its allies, suggesting, for example, that supporters of Israel were motivated by money. Tlaib caused outrage just hours after taking the oath of office for her profanity-laced call for Trump’s impeachment. And Ocasio-Cortez suggested House Speaker Nancy Pelosi was singling out women of color when she upbraided them recently.

So far, by contrast, Pressley has not had a personal controversy of that level.

Representative Veronica Escobar of Texas said she was impressed that Pressley visited El Paso this month and spoke powerfully about the conditions for immigrant detainees there.

"She is such a powerful force for good," Escobar said about Pressley. "She is kind, generous, thoughtful. She's got the strength that I admire. So it just breaks my heart that because she wants to create a better country for all of us that she has to endure such abuse. But I know her strength, and I know she'll power through it."

But even as the House voted Tuesday to condemn Trump's comments, Democrats are still divided because of the internal struggle the squad has created by bucking the leadership of Pelosi. She publicly dismissed the four after they recently were the only four Democrats to oppose a bill to address the humanitarian crisis at the border.

"All these people have their public whatever and their Twitter world, but they didn't have any following. They are four people and that's how many votes they got," Pelosi told a New York Times columnist.

Barney Frank, a longtime Democratic representative from Massachusetts who retired in 2013, said the Squad's tactics are doing more harm than good to the progressive policies they want to advance. Yet, he said, Pressley seems different.

"My puzzlement about Pressley is that I haven't seen her do anything that seemed to me mistaken the way the other three have, but then she joins them, and apparently agrees with their approach, and I think their approach is very wrong," Frank said in an interview.

Part of the reason Pressley and the rest of the Squad might feel confident in their pushback against Pelosi is because the Democrats are in the majority, said Ross Baker, a political science professor at Rutgers and an expert on Congress.

But Pelosi is focused on retaining the Democratic majority in the House, which means she needs to ensure that moderate Democrats are reelected. That probably means a more cautious political style.

"Pelosi sees the big picture, she understands what it means to be in the majority, and she also remembers, painfully, what it was like to be in the minority," Baker said.

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