



Stephen Crowley/The New York Times

Representative Henry A. Waxman, Democrat of California, has reclaimed his leadership of the Oversight and Government Reform Committee.

## As New 'Cop on the Beat,' Congressman Starts Patrol

By PHILIP SHENON

WASHINGTON, Feb. 5 — Halliburton? Tobacco executives? Vice President Dick Cheney? You've been warned.

Representative Henry A. Waxman, the California Democrat who is the new chairman of the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee, is promising the sort of oversight that the Bush administration has not experienced before.

"There has been no cop on the beat," said Mr. Waxman, who accuses Congressional Republicans of having abdicated their responsibility for oversight in recent years. "And when there is no cop on the beat, criminals are more willing to engage in crimes."

Without constant policing by Congress, he said, "the bad actors feel they can get away with anything."

Returned to power when the Democrats took over Congress last month, Mr. Waxman has already made things difficult for the Bush White House. Last week, he held a televised hearing on accusations that the administration was interfering with the work of climate scientists to protect polluters.

On Tuesday, he has scheduled a hearing on reports of fraud in multi-billion-dollar reconstruction projects in Iraq. The main witness will be L. Paul Bremer III, the former American civilian administrator in Baghdad, who is expected to be questioned about his role in awarding some of the most troubled contracts.

Also testifying will be Stuart W. Bowen Jr., the government's special inspector general for Iraq, whose most recent quarterly report found that the government's reconstruction program was riddled with waste and corruption.

Mr. Waxman is 5-foot-5. He has a big, toothy grin and a bushy mustache. He has none of the glitz of some of his constituents in the 30th Congressional District, which includes Beverly Hills, Malibu and Santa Monica, some of California's richest and flashiest communities.

The congressman, a 67-year-old

grandfather of four, would strike no one — at least no one meeting him for the first time — as a candidate for the role of Congress's most aggressive muckraker.

But the liberal Nation magazine has called him the Democrats' Eliot Ness, and Republicans who have tangled with him say the description is apt.

"The guy is partisan," said Representative Dan Burton of Indiana, a Republican who was the oversight committee's chairman during the Clinton administration and often accused Mr. Waxman of ignoring the misdeeds of that White House, including campaign financing abuses that led to the prosecution of some Democratic fund-raisers.

"But I admire his tenacity," Mr. Burton said. "If the administration

### A powerful muckraker who plans to single out waste and fraud.

were to ask me what to expect, I would tell them to expect one of the toughest investigatory committees you've ever faced."

Other Democratic committee chairmen in the House are expected to bring fresh scrutiny to the administration, notably Representatives John D. Dingell, returning as chairman of the Energy and Commerce Committee, and John Conyers Jr., reinstalled as chairman of the Judiciary Committee, both from Michigan.

But Mr. Waxman may be more feared, if only because he alone among House committee chairmen can issue subpoenas without a committee vote. House rules give the chairman of his committee unusually broad power to force witnesses to testify or turn over evidence; if Mr. Waxman wants a subpoena, out it goes. And he can look into almost

anything he wants. His is the main investigative committee in the House, with virtually unlimited jurisdiction over federal agencies.

Mr. Waxman acknowledged it had been difficult to figure out just where to start, but he said, "I want to concentrate on the theme of waste, fraud and abuse of taxpayer dollars."

Aside from looking at large government contractors in Iraq, Mr. Waxman said he intended to look at businesses involved in the cleanup after Hurricane Katrina.

"I don't think we've ever seen the magnitude of money that's being wasted through fraud and abuse and just pure lack of competence," he said. "There are criminal investigations going on right now about fraud, about billions of taxpayer dollars."

A Halliburton spokeswoman, Cathy G. Mann, did not address Mr. Waxman's criticisms of the company and its major subsidiary in Iraq, KBR. Ms. Mann said in a statement that Halliburton "has always been forthcoming with information regarding KBR's government contracts, and we will continue to do so."

Despite concerns at the White House and in corporate boardrooms about a blizzard of subpoenas in the first months of Democratic control in Congress, Mr. Waxman said he had no plans to issue any for now.

"I'd prefer not to," he said in an interview, insisting that he hoped to work with Republicans to press the administration to cooperate. "I am determined to try to restore some stability and bipartisanship."

Mr. Waxman noted that many of his investigative successes when Democrats had control of the House in the 1990s had not resulted from subpoenas.

He has long pushed for regulation of the tobacco industry; it was his 1994 public hearing at which executives of the nation's big cigarette makers swore under oath that they did not believe smoking was addictive. The televised hearing created momentum for the flood of litigation against the industry that followed. Those executives appeared voluntarily, Mr. Waxman pointed out. Mr.

Waxman, who first entered Congress in 1974 and once described himself as a "proud, self-confessed, unapologetic liberal," said he became a muckraker with some reluctance.

Until the Republican takeover of the House in 1995, he was considered one of the ablest legislators, responsible for landmark bills on the environment and health care. In 1988, he was the chief architect of the government's first comprehensive bill on AIDS. He was a primary author of the Clean Air Act in 1990.

"The thing I love to do," Mr. Waxman said, "is legislate."

But when Republicans took control, he found another focus. "When the Republicans excluded me and other Democrats from legislating, we had to figure out something else to do," he said. "So we did our own investigations."

In recent years, Mr. Waxman and his team of Democratic investigators managed to embarrass the Bush White House repeatedly, most recently with a report that documented meetings between Karl Rove, President Bush's political adviser, and the corrupt lobbyist Jack Abramoff.

A repeated target of Mr. Waxman's attention has been Vice President Cheney, both because of his ties to Halliburton, which he once ran, and Mr. Cheney's refusal to discuss the workings of his energy task force.

Mr. Waxman has prodded other watchdog agencies, including the Government Accountability Office and the inspectors general at cabinet departments, to carry out the inquiries that he could not. Until now, that is.

With subpoena power, Mr. Waxman can demand answers from administration officials, even though he knows that may provoke lengthy court battles.

"Do they want to litigate this?" he asked. "If we're doing our constitutional duty of oversight, how can they refuse to give us information? If they withhold information and try to get away with it, I think it will be very unfortunate for them."