

Waxman Takes Center Stage as Chief Investigator

By: Patrick O'Connor
April 10, 2007 06:33 PM EST

The diminutive Henry A. Waxman is a towering figure on Capitol Hill these days.

As chairman of the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee, the veteran Democratic congressman from California has broad jurisdiction and sweeping subpoena power over a wide spectrum of the federal government -- and corporate America, too.

He's a reformer, an advocate, a showman. And "he understands the investigative process," said Norm Ornstein, a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute.

Since claiming the committee gavel in the new Democratic-controlled Congress, Waxman has opened investigations into potential Hatch Act violations by political appointees at the General Services Administration, requested all the e-mails on the Republican National Committee servers written by White House staff members and reviewed contracting in Iraq, among other hot spots.

Along the way, he has commanded an A-list of witnesses who not only help him ferret out information but also invariably guarantee a stream of headlines.

It was a full house, for instance, in his committee room when Valerie Plame, the former clandestine CIA operative-turned-public celebrity, made her congressional debut last month.

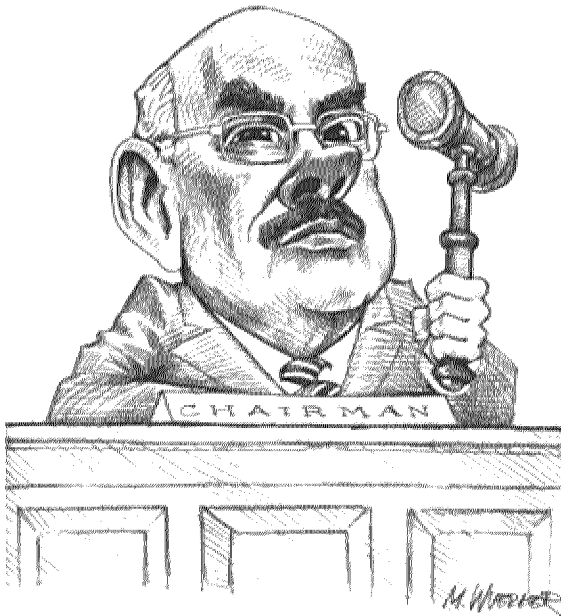
Backed by subpoena power, though he has yet to use it, Waxman has sought to question Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and top White House political adviser Karl Rove, among other administration officials.

Republicans, now in the minority, are necessarily leery of Waxman. And already, GOP aides have begun circulating opposition research on him, trying to paint him as an overzealous liberal whose investigations are little more than a partisan scheme.

Waxman, who has been traveling over the congressional spring break, has been unavailable for an interview.

Over the years, he worked closely with Rep. Tom Davis when the Virginia Republican was the committee's chairman. And Davis, now the committee's ranking member, has refrained from publicly criticizing Waxman since Democrats took power.

"At the end of the day, Chairman Waxman will be judged on whether he has made government better," said Davis spokesman David Marin. "The overriding question will be:



Is this about making government more effective, or is this about embarrassing the administration?"

Nonetheless, in the evolving showdown between President Bush and congressional Democrats over a range of pressing issues, from the war in Iraq to the controversial sacking of eight U.S. attorneys, Waxman is a powerful weapon in the majority's arsenal, if only because of his committee's ability to force members of an administration, stoked in secrecy, to answer questions at a nationally televised hearing.

"There was a tremendous need for oversight," said Rep. Howard Berman (D-Calif.), who goes back with Waxman to their days as members of the Young Democrats at UCLA in the late 1950s and early 1960s. "He is just the guy to do it."

And the committee is not limiting its oversight to just the administration. So far this Congress, members have also held hearings on predatory lending, donations to presidential libraries and the impact of taxpayer-financed stadiums and convention centers on local economies.

In addition, the House has approved bills introduced by Waxman and other members of his committee to place new restrictions on no-bid government contracts, to allow the public greater access to government documents and to strengthen protections for federal whistleblowers.

The committee is not a courtroom, though. So Waxman and his polished staff often play on the media's insatiable appetite for inside information.

The chairman embraces a well-worn Washington tradition of sending official letters to top administration officials that are often intended more for the media than the recipients. And details of his investigations regularly find their way to The New York Times and The Washington Post, among other media, on the eve of a public hearing.

Before Lurita Doan, the head of the General Services Administration, testified before the oversight panel, for example, The Post published revelations unearthed by committee investigators about White House political aide J. Scott Jennings delivering a polling presentation to GSA political appointees in January.

"This is the time-honored way investigative hearings work," said Ornstein, whose recent co-authored book "The Broken Branch" chronicles the decline of Congress in the legislative process. "If nobody is aware of the investigation, it really is like the tree falling in the woods. You've got to get the media to cover it."

Still, there is an ever-present danger of overreaching politically and turning public sentiment against the investigator, as happened with Republicans during Bill Clinton's presidency when Rep. Dan Burton (R-Ind.) chaired the oversight committee and held exhaustive hearings into the president's fundraising apparatus.

"There is definitely the potential for stepping over the line, but Henry knows just how far to take it," Berman said. "He has a fundamental sense of what is fair."

The key to avoiding overreaching, Ornstein said, is to veer away from openly partisan attacks and to use subpoena power as infrequently as possible.

"You don't want to overuse the subpoena," Ornstein said. "On the other hand, you do not want to be without subpoena power."

Waxman was first elected to Congress in 1974, when 75 Democrats were swept into the House in the wake of the Watergate scandal. And he has maintained the reform principles of that era since coming to Washington, even when it means ruffling feathers on his own side of the aisle.

He and Energy and Commerce Chairman John Dingell (D-Mich.), on whose committee Waxman still serves, sparred openly over a range of environmental issues pertaining to auto emissions and the Clean Air Act during the Democrats' previous majority a dozen years ago.

Those battles may give Waxman credibility as an independent operator, but he has since tempered his attacks against members of his own party.

"That was a different time and a different situation," Berman said. "He's shrewder. He's smarter. And he's quite comfortable with what he's doing."

TM & © THE POLITICO & POLITICO.COM, a division of Allbritton Communications Company

