

Thorn in the side of GOP says he's just doing his job

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Monday, May 28, 2007



(05-28) 04:00 PDT Washington -- Henry Waxman's critics say he is a "Bush-bashing" attack dog obsessed with a partisan vendetta.

His admirers say he is a dogged investigator making up for years of neglect during the six years a Republican-controlled Congress exercised little oversight of a Republican-controlled executive branch.

Whatever his motivations, the 17-term Democratic congressman from Los Angeles has been making life distinctly uncomfortable for the Bush White House.

Since he became chairman of the powerful House Oversight and Government Reform Committee in January, Waxman, 67, has been probing some of the more contentious issues surrounding the administration, including prewar intelligence on Iraq, corruption in postwar reconstruction, White House contacts with convicted lobbyist Jack Abramoff, allegations that administration officials used political party e-mail accounts to conduct government business, and the misinformation surrounding the friendly fire death in Afghanistan of former NFL star Pat Tillman.

Last week, Waxman chaired a hearing into the government's often-criticized response to the mental health problems of veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan, which he called "an enormous public health threat." To Rep. Patrick McHenry, a North Carolina Republican on the committee, Waxman's "investigative direction and agenda are simply objectionable."

"Oversight committee hearings are reduced to Bush-bashing press conferences," McHenry said through a spokesman.

Ask Waxman about his agenda, and the bald, 5-foot-5 Democrat, who has represented the affluent west side of Los Angeles for 32 years, offers a nonpartisan explanation.

"I believe in government, and I want the government to be effective. I want us to look and make sure that government agencies are doing a good job for the American people," he said in an interview.

Longtime friends and associates, in his hometown and on Capitol Hill, say policy drives Waxman more than politics.

"He's much more focused on substance and performance than he is on politics per se," said House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer, D-Md.

Lining the walls of Waxman's office on Capitol Hill are the trophies of what he considers his most important achievements: framed facsimiles of milestone bills he has authored that he says have made the United States safer and healthier.

There is a copy of the Clean Air Act of 1990, which helped combat smog, acid rain, toxic air emissions and ozone depletions; and of the 1996 Food Quality Protection Act, which regulates pesticides in food. There is a photograph of Waxman smiling after a 1994 public hearing in which the nation's cigarette executives swore under oath that they did not believe smoking was addictive. The hearing created momentum for nationwide litigation against the tobacco industry.

"The thing that brings me the most satisfaction is to pass legislation that I know is going to make an important difference in people's lives," Waxman said.

Waxman, who was born in Los Angeles and grew up in an apartment above a Watts grocery run by his father, a Jewish immigrant from Russia, got his bachelor's and law degrees at UCLA. After serving in the California Assembly for five years, Waxman won his seat in Congress in 1974 and has held it ever since, usually winning with more than 60 percent of the vote.

For 16 years, when the Democrats controlled Congress, Waxman chaired the House Energy and Commerce Committee's subcommittee on health and environment, pushing through groundbreaking legislation on Medicaid and Medicare coverage, AIDS, and availability of prescription drugs.

As the ranking minority member on the Government Reform Committee from 1997 until last year, Waxman continued to press on health-related issues, notably including the use of steroids in sports. But he also broadened his interests, starting

investigations into waste, fraud and abuse in government contracting -- a prelude, his staffers say, to his current probes.

"Abuse of funding in Iraq reconstruction, tampering with science and the issue of climate change, the tragedy of Pat Tillman's family -- these are ... major insults to the public trust he is investigating," said East Bay Rep. George Miller, D-Martinez, whose Capitol Hill office is next door to Waxman's.

Waxman's opponents see it differently.

"The administration, for a variety of reasons, is wounded, and Chairman Waxman is going in for the kill," David Marin, Republican staff director for the Oversight Committee, wrote in an e-mail to The Chronicle.

FrontPage Magazine, an online conservative political magazine, recently described Waxman as "spewing out subpoenas all over the place in what is the beginning of an obvious drive toward impeaching the president."

Waxman countered that when Rep. Tom Davis, R-Va., was chairman, he had the word "Oversight" removed from the committee's title altogether. One of Waxman's first actions as the new chairman was to restore it.

As for his alleged abuse of subpoena power, Waxman said he has issued only three subpoenas, reluctantly -- one of which is to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, on the administration's prewar claims that Iraq was building nuclear weapons.

He pointed to Rep. Dan Burton, R-Ill., chairman of the committee under President Bill Clinton.

"He issued 1,052 subpoenas!" Waxman said with an incredulous chuckle. "And then, when the Republicans came to power, there wasn't a scandal too big for them to ignore. ... That was inappropriate and partisan oversight."

Burton's office did not respond to requests for an interview.

For all the limelight of his investigations, Waxman is not a Capitol Hill celebrity, nor does he appear to seek to be one -- even as he represents one of the most glamorous, celebrity-driven districts in the country, which includes Beverly Hills and Bel-Air.

Derek Shearer, a foreign policy adviser to President Clinton and now a professor at Occidental College, said the last time he ran into Waxman, the congressman was walking hand in hand with his wife, Janet, into a Los Angeles Starbucks.

"He's probably the least self-promoting member of Congress," Shearer said.

Waxman, a grandfather of four and an observant Jew, is "plenty tough" on the job, but "personally, he is almost a puppy dog, a great guy with great family life, very nice kids, very religious," said Norman Ornstein, an expert on government and Congress at the conservative-leaning American Enterprise Institute and a friend of Waxman's.

Which is not to say that Waxman is entirely modest. Along with copies of laws he had authored, his office is decorated with numerous pictures of him shaking hands with Presidents Clinton and Reagan, and with the late Pope John Paul II.

"He doesn't insert himself onto the front pages of the local papers, but when he needs to use his influence he does," said Jack Weiss, Waxman's friend and a member of the Los Angeles City Council whose district lies within Waxman's territory. For instance, Waxman recently helped kill the plan by the FBI to build a new headquarters for its local office on the west side of Los Angeles -- a project that, many feared, would snarl the already terrible traffic in the area, Weiss said.

Waxman has never run for another office, and his decadeslong career in the House has allowed him to pursue issues he cares about.

"He spent 10 years fighting to get the Clean Air Act passed," said Phil Schiliro, who has worked as Waxman's chief of staff for 25 years. "That's difficult for a lot of people in politics because they are inevitably running for another office. He doesn't want that."

What does he want? What, ultimately, drives him? In his characteristically dispassionate, low-key manner, Waxman answers:

"I just want to make sure that the government's working."

Online resources

For more information on Rep. Waxman's investigations, go to:

Issues on Waxman's docket

IRAQ

INTELLIGENCE -- Waxman's committee is seeking information on prewar intelligence used to justify the war in Iraq, including the Bush administration's claim that Iraq was attempting to purchase uranium from Niger to be used in nuclear weapons. Waxman has issued a subpoena to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice in the matter.

Waxman: "It was important to me because it was for that reason that I voted for the authorization for President Bush to go to war if necessary, if the U.N. process didn't allow the disarming of Saddam Hussein. So I think it's important to get this information and to have people held accountable."

WHITE HOUSE E-MAIL -- The committee is investigating whether White House officials used the Republican National Committee e-mail accounts to conduct government business. Waxman has subpoenaed RNC documents and its chairman, Robert Duncan, to be questioned about whether the party's e-mail system was used by Bush officials to conceal some of their government actions.

Waxman: "The law in this country tries to protect civil servants from having their bosses call them in and talk to them about doing something in campaigns where they really are not in a position to say 'no' for fear that they might not be treated as well at work. And so this is not supposed to be permitted in government facilities."

IRAQ RECONSTRUCTION -- The committee is seeking information on alleged corruption and waste involved in government contracts for reconstruction and development work in Iraq.

Waxman: "The first and most important one is that our committee ... should be the watchdog for the taxpayers' dollars. We want to make sure that taxpayers' dollars are not involved in waste, fraud or abuse. ... In Iraq reconstruction contracts ... there've been billions still unaccounted for."

DEATH OF PAT TILLMAN -- Last month, Waxman's committee held hearings seeking to find out "why the Tillman family and the American public were misled about the cause of death of Army Cpl. Patrick Tillman."

Waxman: "We owe a lot to our servicemen and women. ... But one thing we owe them more than anything else is the truth, and I'm determined that we uphold that standard."

JACK ABRAMOFF SCANDAL -- The investigation into the relationship between the convicted lobbyist and the White House began in 2006, after Abramoff pleaded guilty to mail fraud, tax evasion and four counts of conspiracy. It was launched by then-committee Chairman Tom Davis, R-Va., and then-ranking member Waxman. On Tuesday, Waxman disclosed that Susan Ralston, a former top aide to Karl Rove, was refusing to testify on the matter unless granted immunity.

Waxman: "We still don't know the full story on the Abramoff scandal. We know it threatened the integrity of government decisions but it is still not clear how far the corruption extended. That is why we are continuing our investigation."

-- Anna Badkhen

Rep. Henry Waxman

Born: Sept. 12, 1939, in Los Angeles. He grew up over his family's store in Watts. Now lives in Beverly Hills.

Bachelor's degree: Political science, 1961, UCLA.

Law degree: 1964, UCLA.

Family: Married to wife Janet; two children.

Career: 1965-1968, practiced law; 1969-1975, served in California Assembly; 1974, elected to the House of Representatives. Now represents the 30th District (West Los Angeles, Santa Monica and West Hollywood) and is in his 17th term.

Sources: Associated Press; Almanac of American Politics; Congressional Quarterly; research by Chronicle librarian Kathleen Rhodes

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*This article appeared on page **A - 1** of the San Francisco Chronicle*