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The Scariest Guy in Town

With subpoena power, Henry Waxman could be the Republicans' worst nightmare

By KAREN TUMULTY

In the altered landscape that is Washington, there's a new contender for the title of Scariest Guy in Town. He stands 5 ft. 5, speaks softly and has all the panache of your parents' dentist. But when it comes to putting powerful people on the hot seat, there's no one tougher and more tenacious than veteran California Congressman Henry Waxman.

In the Democrats' wilderness years, Waxman fashioned himself as his party's chief inquisitor. Working with one of the most highly regarded staffs on Capitol Hill, he has spent the past eight years churning out some 2,000 headline-grabbing reports, blasting the Bush Administration and the Republican Congress on everything from faulty prewar intelligence and flaws in missile defense to the flu-vaccine shortage and arsenic in drinking water.

Come January, however, the man that the liberal Nation magazine once called the "Eliot Ness of the Democrats" can do even more,

thanks to the two words that strike fear in the heart of every government official: subpoena power. As the new chairman of the House Government Reform Committee, Waxman will have free rein to investigate, as he puts it, "everything that the government is involved with." And the funny thing is, Waxman can thank the Republicans for the unique set of levers he will hold. Under a rules change they put through in the days when they used the panel to make Bill Clinton's life miserable,



the leader of Government Reform is the only chairman who can issue subpoenas without a committee vote.

Then Chairman Dan Burton-- who famously re-enacted the suicide of

Clinton deputy White House counsel Vince Foster by shooting at what he called a "head-like thing" (later widely reported to be a melon) in his backyard-- issued 1,089 such unilateral subpoenas in six years. Since a Republican entered the White House, the G.O.P. Congress has been far less enthusiastic in its oversight. Waxman likes to point out that the House took 140 hours of sworn

testimony to get to the bottom of whether Clinton had misused the White House Christmas-card list for political purposes, but only 12 hours on prisoner abuse at Abu Ghraib.

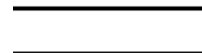
Iraq will get new attention with Waxman in power. This week he plans to send a letter to Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld demanding information on Halliburton's \$16 billion contract to provide services to troops there. Waxman's staff has been poring over the fine print of that deal for more than two years, and is convinced that much of the money is slipping between layer upon layer of subcontractors.

Waxman, 67, is a most unlikely character to represent the glitzy congressional district that includes Beverly Hills. Nearly every profile of him points out that the hometown Congressman for the Chateau Marmont on Sunset Boulevard has never attended the Academy Awards. "It's such a long night," he says. "When I watch it on TV, I can get a snack." Waxman grew up over his family's grocery store near Watts, got his political start in the state assembly and came to Washington among the storied post-Watergate reformers known as the Class of 1974. Asked to name a hobby, he draws a blank.

What Waxman does love to do is write laws, and he has been extraordinarily good at it. The walls of his Washington office are covered with framed pens that Presidents from Ronald Reagan to Bill Clinton used to sign the laws that Waxman helped make a reality: the Clean Air Act, generic-drug legislation, food- and toy-safety laws, and Medicare catastrophic coverage, to name a few. In 1994, as chairman of the health and environment subcommittee, he lined up the chief executives of the nation's biggest tobacco companies, had them raise their right hands and then shredded them as finely as

their own products. His hearings helped pave the way for the lawsuits that followed, which led to a landmark \$246 billion legal settlement with the industry.

Opponents have noted that Waxman is hardly an equal-opportunity muckraker. Republicans and industry groups say his investigatory zeal is limited to conservative targets: he spent the Clinton years trying to fend off congressional investigations, including the ones into the White House's questionable campaign fundraising practices, and once led a Democratic walkout when Republicans released a report on the firing of White House travel-office workers. While Waxman promises what he calls oversight, the Republicans say it'll be more like a witch hunt, and the Administration is promising to fight him all the way to the Supreme Court to protect itself against what it expects to be a frontal assault on Executive power. Waxman says the G.O.P. should take comfort in the fact that he has historical perspective. "I've seen a good example of overreaching," he says, referring to the committee's treatment of Clinton. "It's not the way to behave."



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