

Waxman sinks teeth into watchdog role

Chairman of House oversight committee is called 'tenacious' and grandstanding

By Ken Dilanian
USA TODAY

WASHINGTON — Erik Prince, the former Navy commando who runs Blackwater USA, has rarely spoken publicly about his company's billion-dollar security work for the U.S. government in Iraq and Afghanistan.

But last week, Prince found himself in a packed congressional hearing room, raising his right hand as shutters clicked and television cameras rolled. Hours of uncomfortable questions followed.

More than anyone else, one man made it happen: Democrat Henry Waxman of Los Angeles, a three-decade House veteran whose bald, mustachioed, bespectacled mien has become the face of oversight in Congress.

"I want you to know that Blackwater will be accountable today," Waxman said in his opening statement.

The hearing underscored the impact of having Waxman at the helm of the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform. Democrats may have gained control of Congress in last year's elections, but their majority isn't always enough to make a difference. In the Senate, for instance, Republicans have enough votes to block Democratic legislation. But in the House of Representatives, the Republicans can't stop Waxman, who wields his subpoena power to investigate the Bush administration and its allies.

His committee room is where former CIA spy Valerie Plame spoke publicly for the first time about the administration's leak of her identity, and where former Defense secretary Donald Rumsfeld denied knowing of a coverup of ex-football star Pat Tillman's death by friendly fire.

"Let's be honest, it's a pretty target-rich environment for Mr. Waxman these days," quipped David Marin, the oversight committee's Republican staff director.

Other Republicans accuse Waxman of partisan grandstanding, or "following the dictates of trial lawyers," as Florida Rep. John Mica put it.

"Henry's been campaigning for next election since he became chairman," said Rep. Darrell Issa of California.

Lawyers specializing in congressional inquiries call Waxman substantive and fair.

"He's dogged. He's tenacious. He's got a very large and experienced investigative staff," said Ray Sheppard, a Republican and former Senate investigator.

A history of activism

Since January, Waxman's committee has held 29 hearings with a focus on what he calls waste, fraud and abuse. Recurring subjects of scrutiny have been Iraq contracting and the government's handling of Gulf Coast hurricane rebuilding.

His inquiries tend to make headlines, and they sometimes prompt changes even before Waxman has a chance to grill officials under oath.

In July, for example, the Federal Emergency Management Agency announced a new effort to study contamination in temporary trailers given to Gulf Coast hurricane victims — the day before Waxman held a hearing exposing FEMA efforts to downplay the problem.

"I think oversight is a very important function, in some ways even more important than legislating," says Waxman, 68, whose district includes West Hollywood and Beverly Hills.

Not that Waxman hasn't done his share of lawmaking. He co-authored the 1990 changes to the Clean Air Act and helped write a law requiring for the first time nutritional labeling on food, as well as measures governing pesticides, safe drinking water and health care for poor people. In 1982, he held the first congressional hearing on the disease now known as AIDS.

Waxman may be best known for putting seven tobacco company chiefs under oath at a 1994 hearing in which they claimed cigarettes were not addictive. His efforts to ban smoking in public buildings failed, but his tobacco hearings led to a wave of such laws in states and cities across the country.

The grandson of Jews who fled the 1903 Kishinev pogrom in what is now Moldova, Waxman was the first person in his family to go to college. His father owned a small

grocery store and later worked for chain stores as a union member.

Four years out of law school, Waxman unseated an incumbent to win a seat in the California Assembly in 1968, and six years later, he was elected to Congress in the post-Watergate wave. He hasn't faced a tough race since.

In 1997, he became the ranking Democrat on the oversight committee, then headed by Republican Dan Burton of Indiana, who aggressively investigated the Clinton administration. "They issued over a thousand subpoenas," Waxman says. "I thought it was an abuse of power." Burton did not respond to requests for comment.

Waxman worked more cooperatively with Burton's successor, Rep. Tom Davis, R-Va. In 2005, at Waxman's request, Davis

chaired hearings on the use of steroids that led Major League Baseball and other professional leagues to toughen their anti-doping policies.

'Multiple mistakes'

Waxman's Blackwater hearing helped fuel several days of news stories examining the firm's conduct in Iraq, including investigations that its guards killed innocent Iraqi civilians.

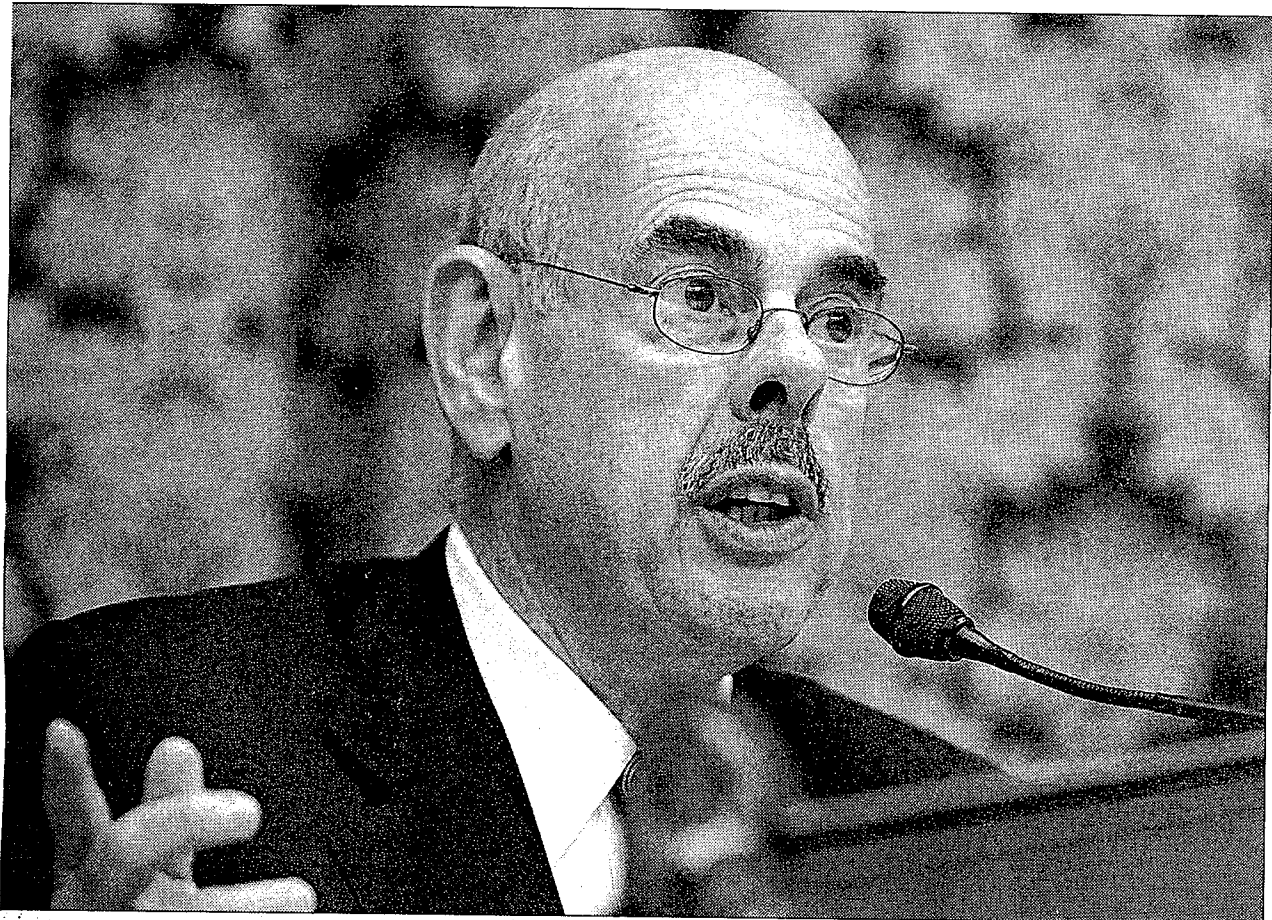
One person watching closely was Army Lt. Col. Jeanette McMahon, who is suing Blackwater over an Afghanistan plane crash in which her husband, Army Lt. Col. Michael McMahon, was killed.

Waxman questioned Prince closely about the November 2004 crash, which

Waxman's committee said was the result of "reckless conduct by the Blackwater pilots and multiple mistakes by Blackwater." A National Transportation Safety Board report blamed pilot error.

Prince denied that Blackwater was at fault, although he said, "Any time you have an accident, it's an accident; something could have been done better." It was his first public comment about the case.

"Thank God that in our country the politicians can bring someone like this to the table," McMahon said.



By Susan Walsh, AP

Three decades in House: Democratic Rep. Henry Waxman says oversight is "in some ways even more important than legislating."



By Mannie Garcia, AFP/Getty Images

Plame: Testifies in March before the House oversight committee. The former CIA spy spoke publicly there for the first time about the leak of her identity.



File photo by John Duricka, AP

April 14, 1994: Heads of the nation's biggest cigarette companies are sworn in before the House Energy panel. Waxman was on the committee at the time. His efforts to ban smoking in public buildings failed, but the hearings led to such laws in states and cities.