

Inquisitor Waxman has pit-bull reputation

Veteran congressman cast in aggressive role

**By Michael Collins, collinsm@shns.com
April 2, 2007**

WASHINGTON — One magazine famously referred to him as the Democrats' Eliot Ness. Another suggested recently that, as far as the Bush White House is concerned, he just might be the scariest guy in town.

Henry Waxman? Scary?

No way, says the California congressman, who insists his pit-bull reputation is undeserved.

"I think I'm a nice guy," Waxman said, flashing a disarmingly toothy grin. "I'm not a scary guy, unless somebody has some reason to be frightened of Congress looking into what they are up to."

Short, balding and generally quiet-spoken, Waxman hardly fits the image of a tough, bullheaded inquisitor, but it's a role that he has been playing for years. The Los Angeles resident, whose congressional district includes Westlake Village and Agoura Hills, has been one of the current administration's most hard-nosed and persistent critics since George W. Bush took up residence at 1600 Pennsylvania Ave.

Now, he's a critic with subpoena power.

When Democrats reclaimed the majority in January for the first time in 12 years, Waxman was put in charge of the House's main investigative committee. As chairman of the Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, he has the staff and resources to make Bush's last two years in office one long nightmare.

In just three months, Waxman has opened a number of investigations into questionable activities by the White House and other government agencies.

The probes have focused on the administration's outing of former CIA agent Valerie Plame, squalid housing conditions at Walter Reed Army Medical Center and concerns about how the Environmental Protection Agency handled a permit for a proposed liquefied natural gas terminal off the coast of Oxnard.

Democrats and other critics of the Bush administration applaud Waxman's relentless investigations into the alleged misdeeds of those in power and his absolute refusal to back down.

Republicans consider him a partisan nuisance but one who is far too powerful to be ignored.

The way Waxman sees it, he's just doing what the Constitution gives Congress the authority to do, which is keep watch over the Executive Branch.

"It's part of the checks and balances of our Constitution; it's a way for us to see whether the laws are working or not and need to be changed," he said in his office next door to the Capitol. "It's as important a function for the Congress as is (passing) legislation."

'Most secretive White House'

However, oversight inevitably leads to confrontation, especially with an administration not known for openness.

"This is the most secretive White House that any of us can possibly remember, much more than even Richard Nixon's administration," Waxman said. "I think they were enabled being even more secretive than they otherwise might have been by Republican leaders in Congress, who thought they were doing the administration a favor by not asking them questions and not requiring them to give up information.

"I think they did them a disservice because when you air these ideas and get some input and criticism that is constructive, you might have avoided some of the terrible problems that this administration has caused in Iraq and other places with their policies."

Conservatives and liberals may disagree over the way Waxman approaches his job, but both sides concede that oversight committee chairman is a role tailor-made for him.

"He's smart. He's tough. He won't get deflected," said Rep. Howard Berman, a Los Angeles Democrat who is a longtime political ally and friend. "He'll also have a sense of fairness. He won't assume simply because he's of one political party and somebody else is of the other political party that they are guilty of wrongdoing."

Waxman may be a menace to the Bush White House, but to "whoever is the president, Henry would be a pain," said Norm Ornstein, a congressional scholar for the American Enterprise Institute, a conservative think tank.

"He is very tough, very smart, very tenacious and believes very strongly in Congress' oversight role. This is not a partisan thing."

Others vehemently disagree.

At a hearing last week into allegations of misconduct at the General Services Administration, the committee's former chairman, Rep. Dan Burton, R-Ind., ripped into Waxman, accusing him of unfairly going after Bush officials. Yet when the committee investigated the Clinton administration's foibles, Waxman howled that Republicans were "on a witch hunt," Burton said.

Waxman said Burton's characterizations of that era "are inaccurate, wrong."

"Let's go and get all of the newspapers and reports to the committee and look at them. We'll find out how inaccurate they are," a furious Burton yelled. "? You did that for six years, and now you're going to have to eat it!"

Rep. Elton Gallegly, R-Simi Valley, said Waxman "is very partisan, but that's a way of life around this town." Much of the legislation that Waxman introduces or the investigations he pursues seems to focus less on substance and more on the Republican Party or the Bush administration, Gallegly said.

"But, keep in mind, we all have a different way of finding the way that we can be most effective," Gallegly said.

Few would dispute that Waxman has been effective since his arrival in Washington some three decades ago.

The walls of his office are lined with framed pens that Presidents Carter, Reagan and Clinton used to sign into law various pieces of legislation that Waxman has pursued over the years.

He fought the Reagan administration's efforts to revise the Clean Air Act and won. He has worked to expand Medicaid coverage for the poor and was one of the first lawmakers to push for federal funding for AIDS research.

His battles with the tobacco industry have been legendary. In 1994, he hauled the chief executive officers of the major tobacco companies before a congressional committee, put them under oath, then watched incredulously as one by one they testified that smoking was not addictive and did not cause any disease. The episode was a major turning point in the anti-smoking campaign and led to a number of states suing the industry, eventually forcing the companies to pay out large cash settlements.

Cabrillo Port fight

In one of his latest crusades, Waxman has been fighting the EPA over its role in the approval of an air quality permit for Cabrillo Port, a liquefied natural gas terminal that BHP Billiton wants to build 14 miles off the shore of Ventura County.

The EPA initially told BHP that it must comply with certain key state and local air pollution requirements. The EPA later reversed its decision, and Waxman says some documents obtained from the agency show that the reversal came after intervention by a "senior EPA political official."

He warned in a letter sent to the EPA on Friday that the reversal would likely result in "degraded air quality" in California and demanded that the agency turn over additional documents for his investigation.

"We were just thrilled that he took this on," said Susan Jordan of the California Coastal Protection Network, which brought the issue to Waxman's attention.

When the group first briefed Waxman on its suspicions that politics had influenced the permitting process, "he was very quiet during the meeting," Jordan recalled. "He paid close attention and made very few remarks. I couldn't read what he was thinking."

But a month and a half later, when Jordan went to Washington to meet with Waxman's staff, one of his aides showed up with a large binder of documents that had been researched, marked, underlined and highlighted. "Every document we provided had been thoroughly reviewed," Jordan said. "It was one of the more pleasant surprises I've had in dealing with an elected official."

Like his political philosophy, Waxman's empathy for those fighting government or big business is rooted in his early childhood. The 67-year-old lawmaker was born in East Los Angeles and grew up in an apartment over his father's grocery store near Watts. His grandparents were Russian Jews who fled to Montreal, then Los Angeles, after a bloody pogrom at the turn of the century. Their stories of anti-Semitic violence were a lesson in horror and human suffering he would never forget.

Parents supported New Deal

His parents, Lou and Esther Waxman, were strong New Deal supporters. "Franklin Roosevelt was revered in our home, as was President Truman," Waxman recalled.

His father belonged to the Retail Clerks International Union and talked often about the importance of collective bargaining so workers could get health benefits and provide a future for their children. The value of an education was also instilled into young Henry; he became the first member of his family to get a college education.

At UCLA, where he earned his bachelor's and law degrees, he became involved in the civil rights and anti-Vietnam War movements. It was during that era when he first met Berman. As Berman tells it, Waxman was running for vice president of the Young Democrats.

"I voted for the other guy, and I spent the next 47 years paying for that vote," Berman said, laughing.

Despite that rocky beginning, a lifelong friendship and political alliance was formed. Waxman and Berman became influential players in Los Angeles politics. Although the odds were against him, Waxman challenged Democratic incumbent Lester McMillan for the state Assembly in 1968 and won. Six years later, he was elected to the U.S. House as part of the post-Watergate class of reformers.

Waxman's congressional district takes in the epicenter of the film industry, including the tony areas of Beverly Hills, Bel-Air and Malibu. Although he's a movie buff — "he knows more about 1940s and 1950s movies than anyone I know," Berman said — he isn't one to revel in Hollywood glitz.

He's a voracious reader, takes long walks and believes in the virtues of exercise, Berman said. He's also devoted to his wife, Janet Kessler, and their two children and four grandchildren.

His clashes with the Bush administration aside, Waxman said he respects the Executive Branch and its role in government. He believes just as strongly that the administration is duty-bound to be open about what it's doing.

"They run the government, but they are obligated to answer questions because the government does not belong to them," Waxman said. "It belongs to the American people."

Henry Waxman

Born: Sept. 12, 1939, in Los Angeles.

Education: Bachelor of Arts, UCLA, 1961; law degree, UCLA, 1964.

Family: wife Janet Kessler, two children, four grandchildren.

Party: Democrat.

Current office: U.S. representative, California's 30th District.

First elected: 1974.

Term in Congress: 17th.

Committees:

- Energy and Commerce.
- Oversight and Government Reform (chairman).

Web site: <http://www.house.gov/waxman>.

Source: Congress.org; U.S. House of Representatives