

Henry Waxman, Democratic Gadfly, Takes on Enron

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By Eli Kintisch

Henry Waxman has made a career of being a nuisance.

Throughout the 1990s, the 28-year veteran of the House of Representatives harassed the tobacco industry with hearing after hearing in an attempt to regulate their product as a drug.

Now Mr. Waxman has his eye on shaking up another set of corporate suites. As the lead House gadfly in the developing Enron scandal, Mr. Waxman, a California Democrat, has pressed the case for fingering company executives and government officials responsible for the downfall of the seventh largest company in the United States. Armed with a staff of six, a single fax machine and an overworked press aide, Mr. Waxman is trying to ensure that the investigation into Enron will be as much about business as politics.

As ranking minority member of the House Governmental Reform committee, Mr. Waxman has no formal committee authority or subpoena power. Still, he was among the first on Capitol Hill to focus on Enron's ties to the Bush administration, even as wartime patriotism swept the capital.

"Jews believe in fighting for social justice, for healing the world," said Mr. Waxman, who represents the heavily Jewish Beverly-Fairfax area of Los Angeles. Mr. Waxman last month blasted Enron executives in a congressional hearing. "[They] essentially looted the company while leaving employees and shareholders with nothing," he said.

In the Senate, where Democrats hold committee chairmanships and subpoena power, a handful of committees have begun investigations into Enron, as have the Justice Department and the Securities and Exchange Commission.

Early in the winter, Mr. Waxman pressed the administration on Enron's ties to the White House energy commission, convened in private last spring. In a letter to Vice President Dick Cheney, Mr. Waxman wrote: "It is appropriate to ask whether Enron communicated to you or others affiliated with your task force information about its precarious financial position." Last week, after resisting for months, the White House revealed that the vice president had met six times with Enron executives to discuss national energy policy. However, the White House said Enron executives never discussed their company's financial condition in those meetings.

Mr. Waxman's resolve is legendary on Capitol Hill. Republican foe Billy Tauzin of Louisiana told the Washington Times that Mr. Waxman was a "brilliant adversary." And former Republican Rep. Bill Paxon of New York once called Mr. Waxman "the most focused, tenacious liberal in Congress."

Long in the majority, Mr. Waxman has taken to his watchdog role happily. In the early days of the Bush administration, he pressured the White House to review aide Karl Rove's investment holdings and agitated on the makeup of the president's Social Security task force, an issue on which he introduced legislation last session.

Then, despite historic bipartisan cooperation in Washington after September 11, Mr. Waxman questioned the efficiency and openness of the Office of Homeland Security and joined Democrats in attacking what he considered Republican war profiteering on energy and tax cuts.

Mr. Waxman also appeared in a press conference in October to condemn what he saw as the administration's reluctance to curb sales of high-powered rifles, some of which can pierce tank armor. The

airline-security package, he later charged, only gave Republicans in the House a chance to "become very partisan and protect those same companies who had been discredited by the poor job they had done."

"I support the war," said Mr. Waxman one Friday late last session in an interview with the Forward in his Washington office. "But it's our job in the Congress to oversee how this administration is operating."

The congressman's stubbornness and deft ability to cut deals have impressed colleagues on both sides of the aisle. Key bills he has passed include legislation to increase AIDS funding and to expand Medicaid for the poor. In 1981 he led a relentless campaign to reauthorize the 1970 Clean Air Act, blocking a vote with procedural tricks for over a year until he had convinced enough legislators to oppose the Reagan White House and pass the law.

But Mr. Waxman, whose shiny pate and bristly mustache lend him the look of a sociology professor, is best known for taking on Big Tobacco. In 1994, he lined up seven top tobacco executives in a committee hearing and grilled them on the hazards of smoking. His investigations into Big Tobacco helped turn the tide in the government's efforts to prosecute the industry.

Born in Los Angeles in 1939, Mr. Waxman grew up in the working-class Jewish neighborhood of Boyle Heights. His family later moved to Beverly-Fairfax, and he soon enrolled in the University of California Los Angeles, where he studied political science. In 1972, he was elected to Congress.

While his focus is decidedly domestic, Mr. Waxman has a strong record of support for the Jewish state. He was indelibly affected, he said, by a trip to Saudi Arabia in 1974, when then-King Faisal told his delegation that Saudi Arabia would never sign a peace treaty with Israel. This after Mr. Waxman, a member of a congressional delegation, was nearly denied entry into the country on account of his religion.

Many Arab countries, said Mr. Waxman, a longtime supporter of the Oslo peace process, "don't want to reconcile with Israel, they want to destroy Israel." The congressman now favors widening the war on terrorism to include Iraq, despite his voting against the use of force in 1990. "My biggest regret about the war wasn't my vote," he said. "It's the fact that we didn't get rid of Saddam Hussein."