

HENRY, HENRY, HE'S OUR MAN!

As politicians sweat out this election season with its potential for big surprises, there's one guy with nothing to worry about. Henry Waxman's seat in Congress is as safe as they come.

Henry, as we all call him, has been serving as our congressman since 1974. He spent time representing us in the California Assembly for six years before that. And before that he was organizing for Democrats while a student at UCLA. So you might say Henry is something of a fixture in Westside politics.

And that's how people in these parts like it.

Henry has, for decades, served as the House of Representative's Investigator-in-Chief. His style is always the same: politely give the person in the hot-seat a chance to explain himself or herself, and then, the moment there's an inconsistency or obfuscation, go for the jugular.

As the person being investigated begins to hem and haw, out come

the documents Henry's staff has meticulously prepared that will make the witness look pretty silly - or worse, evil. The words remain polite - Henry never browbeats - but the tone suddenly shifts.

Did Toyota really not know about the accelerator problem before it became front-page news? Ouch. Did BP pay enough attention to safety issues? Come on. Did



Wall Street bosses really deserve their bonuses after running their companies - and the U.S. economy - into the ground? Give us a break.

The players change, but the drilling technique - *sans Novocain* - remains the same.

Did the tobacco company CEOs really believe nicotine wasn't addictive (even though their scientists did)? And what about the use of steroids in Major League Baseball? How could Enron's Ken Lay not know his house of cards was on the verge of collapse? And what about the 300+ tons of shrink-wrapped \$100 bills that went missing in Iraq?

It takes a certain type of nerviness to take on the high and mighty the way Henry has for years and years. *Time* magazine once referred to him as "the scariest guy in Washington." But Henry says *his* only real fear is that he might not be effective *enough* at rooting out waste, fraud and abuse on behalf of the American people.

While not scaring people, Henry serves as the Democrat's point person on Herculean issues such as health care reform and climate change. Even though he represents the district that is home to the Oscars, in 36 years as our representative Henry has never attended the Academy Awards (though he's quick to say he enjoys movies, especially comedies). There's no time for distractions; Henry's got work to do.

Despite the pace, he somehow found time recently to write a book, *The Waxman Report: How Congress Really Works*.

"Some think the emphasis is on the word *really*, as if I'm revealing some inside scoop," noted Congressman Waxman. "The emphasis really should be on the word *works*." For Henry believes, despite its flaws and frustrations, Congress eventually gets it right.

It might take years to pass a major policy initiative, but by sticking to it, chipping away, one small piece at a time, eventually things fall in the right direction.

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He points to successes curbing tobacco use, cleaning up air and water pollution and the imposition of food labeling as examples of patience at work (he was the driving force behind all these efforts; all these efforts were opposed by the industries affected for years and years). But he persists. And eventually succeeds. *Politico* recently wrote that Henry Waxman is the 11th most powerful person in all of Washington.

Henry's book is an interesting read; the reader comes away with the sense that, despite his reputation as a Democratic partisan, Henry is one of the few actually willing to reach across the aisle. Many of Henry's legislative successes, he's quick to point out, required Republican support.

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Waxman had kind words for President George H.W. Bush, who was willing to sign clean air and deficit reduction bills. The Bush deficit reduction bill helped pave the way for the Clinton surplus years, according to Waxman.

Henry has never followed the clubby ways of Congress. He is willing to take on fellow Democrats if he feels they are standing in the way of progress. At the start of this Congress, in a secret vote, he engineered a coup and pushed aside House Lion John Dingell as chair of the House Energy and Commerce Committee. Henry did the same thing while serving on another sub-committee some years back.

Henry is the ultimate pragmatist, always focused on the end result - so long as there's no compromise on principle. Then he'd simply rather wait for another shot, even if it takes years. Remember, he's patient.

Stereotype has it that the Westside is known for its showbiz-driven, shallow, image- and beauty-obsessed culture. That a serious guy like Henry has thrived all these years might seem odd. Then again, he's very much in sync with the Westside's generally liberal political outlook.

Despite our personal or regional flaws, real or imagined, Henry makes us proud. He's the man. He's our man.

He's *Henry*.

Jeff Hall has been a leading editorial voice in the Westside community for nearly 20 years. Westside Magazine is proud to have Jeff as a contributor.