

As Democratic point man in Burton probe, Waxman masks partisanship with cordiality

By Erika Niedowski and
Jock Friedly

In the Capitol's historic Rayburn Room one afternoon last week, Rep. Henry Waxman (D-Calif.) was speculating that, someday, he wouldn't mind becoming chairman of the Government Reform and Oversight Committee.

Just then, the panel's incumbent chairman, Rep. Dan Burton (R-Ind.), came bustling into the room. There were plenty of things for the two to talk about: witness immunity, depositions, a new start-date for the campaign finance hearings that had been postponed a day earlier after an embarrassing Opening Day blunder.

But neither acknowledged the other's presence. Burton only glanced at the committee's ranking Democrat before settling into business a table away, and, when Waxman got up to leave, he walked past the Republican out the door.

It was a minor incident, but a telling one. When asked about his relationship with the chairman, Waxman describes it as "cordial." But get him talking about the campaign finance probe and his language suggests otherwise.

"He's bumbled and mishandled the in-

paign practices, although Waxman had staffers investigate the Republican's fundraising.

Waxman also declined to comment on what he considers the most damaging evidence uncovered by Sen. Fred Thompson's (R-Tenn.) Governmental Affairs Committee. "I could tell you things that [the White House] has done and that others have done that I find offensive," he said. "Whether it's legal is another matter."

From there Waxman changed the subject, launching into a sermon on the sorry state of the campaign finance system: "It seems to me the only worthwhile activity is to have an investigation of campaign finance to show how rotten the system is," he explained.

"Some of the biggest scandals, in my view, are things that are perfectly legal, and we should educate our colleagues and the American people about that so that you could try to develop a consensus to change that."

When the committee's hearings finally debut, few are anticipating a bipartisan look at how overburdened and full of loopholes the current system is. A fierce GOP loyalist, Burton is expected to come out swinging at the White House.

"I have not said anything about any of his fundraising, and I have no interest in it or plan to," Waxman insisted. "I don't want to get into anything that is personal to him."

Representing a safe Los Angeles district, Waxman has had the luxury of not having to hold many fundraisers himself: His campaign raised no money in the first six months of 1997, and an aide said he did not hold any fundraisers between 1991 and 1996. But Waxman concedes he has helped the various Democratic campaign committees rake in the cash, and continues to raise the soft money he says he detests.

"This last campaign, I was making calls

for the Democratic Party and calling some people that I knew and asking them for \$5,000 or \$10,000 and corporate money," he said. "... The whole system is wide open."

For a man who will be one of the central figures in the House's campaign finance probe, Waxman still has managed to focus on the issues for which he is known, including clean air, tobacco, and Food and Drug Administration reform.

"I haven't been tied up in days of [campaign finance] hearings, so that hasn't been a problem," he said. "I haven't been consulted on how this investigation should be conducted so that hasn't taken up too much of my time."

HILL BRIEFS

Despite controversy, parties continue to rake in soft money

If campaign finance reformers have their way, non-federal or "soft" money will soon be abolished, but the fundraising arms of the major party committees

Smits hits Hill for Hispanic month

"NYPD Blue" star Jimmy Smits took

gauge suggests otherwise.
"He's bumbled and mishandled the investigation, and we have no credibility," the 12-term veteran said of Burton in an interview. "I see no value whatsoever in the probe."

Denouncing the Burton-led investigation, of course, is Waxman's job, and he does it quite well. While the 58-year old lawyer says he doesn't see himself as one of the chief defenders of the Clinton administration on Capitol Hill, he is essentially just that.

Waxman uses words like "incompetent" and "unprofessional" to describe Burton's handling of the investigation. He has backed off a call earlier this year for an independent counsel, saying "now it's just so much more complicated with the partisanship."

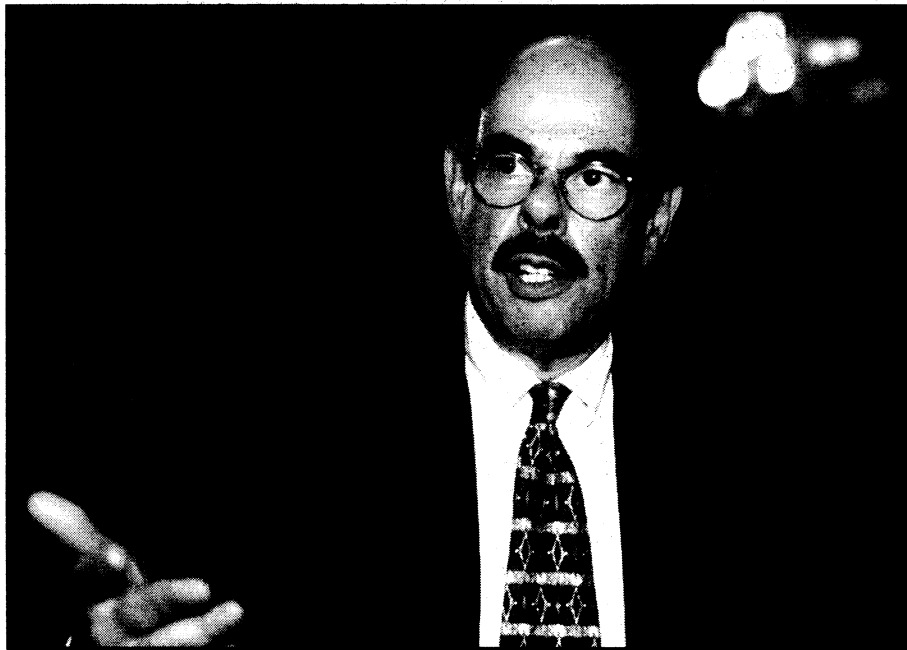
And he insists he has no intention of dragging Burton's name before the panel for the latter's own questionable cam-

out swinging at the White House.

Waxman is expected to swing right back. One Democratic aide described him as having a "mean streak." Indeed, he is notorious for his relentless grilling of a group of tobacco executives at a series of high-profile public health hearings in 1994. Waxman still laments the fact that the Justice Department has not yet brought perjury charges against the executives.

"Henry has never been a shrinking violet in the political trenches," said Rep. Jim Rogan, a California Republican who likes Waxman personally.

Waxman dismisses suggestions, however, that he plans to play hardball with Burton. He claims to have little interest in allegations that Burton shook down a lobbyist for contributions last year, even though the Department of Justice is investigating that charge.



PAMELA HAZEN/THE HILL

Rep. Henry Waxman (D-Calif.) says his relationship with Rep. Dan Burton (R-Ind.) is merely "cordial."

will soon be abolished, but the fundraising arms of the major party committees are squeezing every last soft dollar in the mean time.

According to figures released by the Federal Election Commission (FEC) Monday, soft money activity over the first six months of this year has increased compared with the same time period in the 1995-96 election cycle.

Republicans outraised Democrats by a margin of \$21.7 million to \$13.7 million, reflecting an increase in soft money for both parties. During the first six months of 1995, Republicans had raised \$16.6 million in soft dollars, while Democrats had raised \$10.8 million. These figures are more surprising since 1996 was a presidential election year, and fundraising traditionally falls during off-year elections.

"This is clear evidence that soft money is growing exponentially and that special interests have greater influence over the electoral process and the average citizen is being shut out," said Nancy Ives, spokeswoman for Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.), whose campaign finance reform bill would abolish soft dollars.

In the race for federal or "hard" dollars — more prized by the parties because of their versatility — the Republicans also vastly out-raised the Democrats.

GOP committees raised \$59 million in hard dollars, spending \$51.6 million, and are still more than \$10 million in debt. That figure reflects a 17 percent decrease in fundraising from the same period in 1995.

Democrats have raised \$35.1 million, while spending \$33.3 million, but still have more than \$22 million in debts left over from the 1996 campaign. In a positive sign, fundraising is up 29 percent from the same period two years ago.

— ROBERT SCHLESINGER

Hispanic month

"NYPD Blue" star Jimmy Smits took time out from the fall season to play partisan politics on Capitol Hill Tuesday.

Smits visited the Senate Democratic Policy luncheon for about five minutes on Tuesday, where he "smelled the food" and promoted Hispanic Heritage Month. A frequent visitor to Capitol Hill, Smits was also in town to raise money for the National Hispanic Foundation for the Arts, which supports Latinos interested in acting. He also hosted the Heritage Awards at the Kennedy Center on Monday, which recognized golfer Nancy Lopez, actor Andy Garcia and musicians Gloria Estefan and Jon Secada, among others.

Smits did not attend the Republican luncheon, which does not usually invite non-members to speak.

— MARY LYNN F. JONES

D.C. internships to continue

Del. Eleanor Holmes Norton (D-D.C.) announced last week that she is setting up a permanent Congressional D.C. High School Internship program.

According to Norton's press secretary, Donna Brazile, the decision to continue a high school internship resulted from the feedback Norton received from members and staff who had D.C. high school students as interns.

"On the floor and in the hall, members and staff sought me out to heap praise on the interns," Norton said in a press statement.

Norton wants high school students "to have the opportunity to work in Congress after school, during the summer or for community service," Brazile said.

— SANDRA BASU