

WAXMAN, HENRY ARNOLD (1939–): Democrat from California; has served thirteen terms in the House (Ninety-fourth Congress through One Hundred and Sixth Congress, January 3, 1975–present).

When people in Los Angeles talk about the Westside, they are referring to the place that people from Peoria to Plattsburgh think of as Hollywood or Tinseltown. To be perfectly honest, Hollywood, the entertainment capital of the world, doesn't really exist. While there is an incorporated part of Los Angeles by that name, it has long been in a state of decline; Hollywood and Vine, the center of that mythic world, stands at the eastern end of a rather seedy, rundown, shopping area. When people the world over conjure up images of stars, mansions, recording studios, and glitter, they are unknowingly referring to the Westside.

The Westside is, in the words of the *Almanac of American Politics* (1996 edition), "short-hand for what might be the biggest and flashiest concentration of affluence in the world." Made up of the upper-income enclaves of Beverly Hills, Los Feliz, Brentwood, Pacific Palisades, and Hancock Park, the largely Jewish Fairfax section, and the singles and gays of Santa Monica and West Hollywood, the Westside has gone through explosive change. In the decade from 1986 to 1996, the median price of a home skyrocketed from about \$117,000 to just a little over half a million. It is the most solidly Democratic and liberal part of Southern California, and "probably contributes more money to Democratic candidates and liberal causes than any other district" in the country. It is also the home of one of the ablest, most successful legislators in postwar America: Henry Arnold Waxman.

Not quite five-and-a-half-feet tall, balding, with a toothy grin and a quiet, almost shy demeanor, Henry Waxman is the antithesis of Southern California glamour and glitter. Yet, ever since 1974, he has been regularly reelected by such large majorities that he has a hard time remembering who his opponents are. Waxman's formula for the extraordinary success he has

experienced, both at home and in Congress, is simple: hard work, knowing the issues and parliamentary procedure better than anyone else; a genius for fundraising, and a great deal of patience, persistence, and perspicacity.

Henry Waxman, the son of Louis and Esther (Silverman) Waxman, was born in the Boyle Heights section of Los Angeles on September 12, 1939. From the end of World War I through the end of World War II, Boyle Heights was the Jewish working-class neighborhood of Los Angeles. The Waxmans and the Silvermans originally came to America from Bessarabia, shortly after the Kishinev pogrom of 1905. The Waxmans came to Los Angeles in the early 1920s by way of Montreal; the Silvermans at about the same time via Pittsburgh. As a child, Henry Waxman heard his grandparents' horrifying tales about "how the anti-Semites would come

into town and destroy property, beat people up, threaten their lives. . . . They were younger people, so they could just pick up and leave . . . but they suffered." Waxman credits these memories with spurring his lifelong concern for the poor and the powerless.

When Henry and his sister Miriam were still quite young, the Waxmans moved to Los Angeles' South-Central District, where the family lived above Lou's grocery store at 80th Street and Avalon Boulevard. (Today, South-Central is better

known as Watts.) Since there were no synagogues in South Central, Henry Waxman attended afternoon Hebrew school at the Conservative Huntington Park Hebrew Congregation, where he was bar mitzvah in 1952. He went to Fremont High School "where I was in a minority—both as a Caucasian and as a Jew." Following his graduation in 1957, the family moved to the Jewish Beverly-Fairfax area, which has remained Waxman's political base ever since.

Lou and Esther were both staunch Democrats who took a keen interest in politics. Waxman remembers that as a child, his mother "encouraged him to wear an Adlai Stevenson button to school, even though the teachers made him remove it." While still in high school, Waxman



worked as a volunteer in local political campaigns. The Waxman name was already known in Westside political circles; his uncle Al published a "string of neighborhood newspapers throughout Los Angeles . . . and the Waxman name commanded influence in local politics."

Henry Waxman attended UCLA, where he majored in political science. During his undergraduate years, he became involved with the California Federation of Young Democrats, a network of clubs that specialized in political debate and lobbying for influence in party circles. Upon receiving his bachelor's degree in 1961, he enrolled in the UCLA Law School, from which he received his J.D. in 1964. From 1964 to 1965, the young attorney served as president of the Young Democrats: "We were considered way-out radicals at the time . . . we came out with resolutions endorsing a test-ban treaty, recognition of Red China and disbanding the House Un-American Activities Committee."

More importantly, as president, Waxman made friends with a group of young politicians who together would change the face of California politics: *Howard Berman* and his brother Michael, John Burton, Willie Brown, and David Roberti. Howard Berman and John Burton went on to become members of Congress; Willie Brown became the California Assembly's powerful Speaker and mayor of San Francisco; Roberti, a savvy state senator.

After practicing law for three years, Waxman ran for the California State Assembly. Searching for a district from which to run, he decided to take on twenty-six-year veteran Lester McMillan, who was "losing touch with the voters." Waxman entered the race as a distinct outsider, challenging "not only an incumbent but his own family," for his uncle Al's local paper had long supported McMillan, and continued to do so in this race as well. Aided by his friend Howard Berman and hundreds of volunteers from the ranks of the Federation of Young Democrats, Waxman polled 64 percent of the Democratic primary vote, and then easily won the general election.

The key to victory lay in Waxman's and Berman's then-novel use of differentiated political mailings. The strategy called for "seniors to get one letter from Waxman addressing their concerns, while middle-class homeowners . . . got another." Today, this technique, called direct mail, is a well-accepted tool in all phases of polit-

ical campaigning; in 1968, it was brand-new. Not only was a political career born; it also marked the beginning of political alliance that continues to this day.

The California State Assembly is a rather fluid institution, where freshman and sophomore members often chair important committees. At the beginning of his second term in the Assembly, Waxman chose the right side in the Speakership fight, which went to Valley-area Assemblyman Bob Moretti. In thanks for his support, the new Speaker named Waxman chair of the Assembly's redistricting committee, which was charged with "redrawing California's congressional districts to reflect the demographics of the 1970 census." Waxman also chaired the Health Committee.

During his first term in Sacramento, Waxman married Janet Kessler, the cousin of old friends from UCLA. Kessler, originally from Brooklyn, had moved to Los Angeles as a small child, where she was raised in the predominantly Jewish Fairfax section. When the two married, on October 17, 1971, the neighborhood newspaper ran the headline "Local Assemblyman weds Fairfax Grad." To the native Angelino, this could only mean one thing: the Assemblyman had married a Jew. The new Mrs. Waxman had a daughter, Carol, from a previous marriage. The couple later had a second child, Michael.

In 1972, Henry Waxman helped his old friend Howard Berman win a seat in the Assembly. Thus was born the Waxman-Berman Machine, a "network of liberal politicians who pool their resources, including sophisticated computer technology and campaign coffers, overflowing with contributions from wealthy southern Californians, to help elect like-minded candidates to state and national office." Over the years, the machine came to include *Mel Levine*, black Congressman Julian Dixon, and Howard's brother Michael, who serves as their technical wizard.

In 1974, Henry Waxman ran for Congress from the newly created Twenty-fourth District. Accused of creating a district for himself as chair of the reapportionment committee, Waxman quickly pointed out that, in fact, the district had been created by the Supreme Court-ordered redistricting of 1973. Making judicious use of the Waxman-Berman computer lists and \$95,000 in campaign contributions, Waxman was elected

with 64 percent of the vote. In the intervening years, Waxman's margin of victory has never been less than 63 percent; in his latest campaign (1998), he was reelected with 74 percent of the vote.

After languishing in relative obscurity for two terms, Henry Waxman took the bold and unprecedented step of challenging a senior member for chairmanship of a subcommittee. Setting his sights on the House Energy and Commerce Committee's powerful Subcommittee on Health and the Environment, Waxman waged an all-out effort to defeat North Carolina Democrat Richardson Preyer. The latter, "a popular and highly respected former federal judge," not only outranked Waxman; he also had the backing of the Democratic leadership.

In his effort to become subcommittee chair, Waxman contributed some \$24,000 to the campaign coffers of ten Democratic members of the Energy and Commerce Committee, a practice generally observed only by senior members of Congress. (During his years in Congress, Waxman has contributed more than \$750,000 to his colleague's campaigns—money that comes mainly from his wealthy Westside constituents.) Waxman was also quick to point out that Preyer "represented a tobacco-growing state, favored tobacco subsidies and opposed anti-smoking measures, and that Preyer's family had substantial holdings in a large pharmaceutical company, setting up a potential conflict-of-interest problem." Waxman's bold scheme worked; he was elected subcommittee chair by a final vote of 15 to 12. Accused of buying a chairmanship, Waxman insisted otherwise: "California officer-holders have been doing it for years. That's how the Democrats won a majority in the state assembly."

From his position as subcommittee chair, Henry Waxman was at the center of some of Congress's most crucial legislation. An unabashed liberal, Waxman has become the House's acknowledged expert on health-care and environmental issues. He has fought for expanded health-care coverage, increased funding for AIDS research, and stringent measures for protecting the air we breathe and the water we drink. He has also been absolutely pivotal in improving the quality of nursing home care, bringing down prices for prescription drugs, and helping make available otherwise unprofitable "orphan" drugs for rare diseases.

A master of parliamentary procedure, Waxman learned early on how to stall bills that did not meet with his approval. Case in point, the 1981 battle over reauthorization of the Clean Air Act of 1970. Waxman, along with a host of environmental groups, favored keeping the act largely intact. The Reagan administration, backed by a coalition of the automobile, coal, and steel industries, public utilities companies, and House Energy and Commerce Committee chair "Big John" Dingell, a Michigan Democrat, sought to "significantly relax the act's provisions on automobile emission standards and its rules barring new industry in clean-air zones.

The bill's first stop was Waxman's Subcommittee on Health and the Environment. There, he initiated an ingenious set of stalling tactics that remained in place until public opinion began rallying around his point of view. In addition to holding hearings that promised to go on *ad infinitum*, Waxman one day entered the committee room wheeling a shopping cart containing some 600 amendments. He insisted that the committee clerk read the entire text of each amendment, and barred the committee (as was his right) from holding afternoon sessions. Waxman was able to stall successfully for more than fifteen months, until public sentiment shifted toward strengthening the Clean Air Act.

Eventually, even Chairman Dingell relented. Knowing that he had little chance of passing a weakened act, Dingell adjourned the committee. *Washington Post* writer Michael Barone noted that "Waxman maneuvered and delayed masterfully, preventing action until he had the votes to win. He proved himself to be one of the shrewdest legislators in Congress—and one of the most powerful."

Waxman, who represents a district with a large number of gays (West Hollywood and surrounding neighborhoods have a higher per-capita AIDS rate than New York or San Francisco) was instrumental in passing the first comprehensive federal legislation dealing with AIDS. The bill established "a \$1 billion program [including] appropriations for anonymous testing, home health care, research, counseling, and education." During hearings on the bill, California Republican William Dannemeyer tried to scuttle Waxman's proposal extending anti-discrimination protection to people with the fatal disease. Dannemeyer, an ultra-conservative

protector of family values, suggested that "many of these individuals brought the disease on themselves and [do] not deserve special treatment." Waxman, who is normally a soft-spoken individual, grabbed his microphone and made the caustic remark that "anyone making such an argument was speaking like a supreme being." As a hush fell over the committee room, Waxman, looking directly at his Republican colleague, said: "I don't see any supreme beings on this committee."

Waxman has also been instrumental in writing laws to provide health-care coverage for children, the poor, and the aged. "I believe that government has a responsibility to help those people who are otherwise going to be unprotected," he told writers from the *National Journal*. "Without basic health care, housing, education and the basic necessities of life, I think we're denying people an [equal] opportunity."

The second month that Waxman was in Congress (1974), he made his first trip to Israel with a delegation from the House Armed Services Committee. The junket's purpose was to "look at some of the military equipment that Israel had captured from the Arab countries in the '73 [Yom Kippur] war." Although Waxman was not a member of the committee, its chairman, Illinois Democrat Melvin Price, gave the freshman legislator permission to come along. When informed that the junket would also be making stops in Egypt and Saudi Arabia, Waxman "hurriedly [got] together a visa application." It "asked not only your religion but some documentation to prove you are what you are." Waxman sent an aide to Washington's Adas Israel synagogue (of which the Waxmans are active members) to get a letter on their stationery saying that he was Jewish and that his mother was Jewish.

The Saudis turned his visa application down on the grounds of his religion. Says Waxman: "I was astounded because prominent Jews by that point had been admitted to Saudi Arabia, including the Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger." Waxman took his outrage to Armed Services Committee Chair Price. He expected Price to take the attitude "that none of them [the committee members] would go to Saudi Arabia unless I would go." Instead, Price's response was, "Oh yeah, you may not be able to go . . . They've had this law for a long time." Incensed,

Waxman exploded and told the chairman: "I'm not going as a member of the Jewish community; I'm going as a member of the United States Congress." Waxman put pressure on the State Department, which finally got the Saudis to agree to let him make his visit.

While in Saudi Arabia, Waxman and members of the committee met with the soon-to-be-assassinated King Faisal, who handed out copies of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. Waxman recounts that the king "was a very sinister and mean-looking man . . . and he had these guards around him all the time with daggers or knives in holsters. It was sort of a menacing experience."

When it got to the question-and-answer session "nobody asked him any tough questions." Finally, Waxman, steeling up his courage, said: "Your Highness, we're pleased to be in your country. It's certainly the heart of the Islamic world because of Mecca and Medina. The Arab people have a number of countries. Do you foresee ever, under any circumstances, coexisting with one Jewish country in the Middle East?" Faisal got extremely agitated.

Continuing with his train of thought, Waxman said: "Since you made the distinction between Jews and Zionists, why do you prohibit Jews to come into your country?" Faisal angrily explained to Waxman: "Jews are our enemies. They're friends of our enemies, and friends of our enemies are our enemies . . . Palestine is an Arab country. Jews can live there, but only with Palestine as an Arab country." Waxman's give-and-take with King Faisal had the effect of "shocking [his] colleagues, because that was not the view they were getting from a lot of people [who] were giving them a different analysis of the Middle East."

Henry and Janet Waxman are practicing Conservative Jews. They keep a kosher home, observe Shabbat, and meet twice a month with other Jewish members of Congress for a study session. Waxman is, except under the most pressing of circumstances, unavailable from sundown Friday until sunset Saturday. The Waxmans sent both their children to Hebrew day school in Washington. He is also the only member of Congress to have a grandchild who is a *sabra* (Hebrew for "native-born Israeli"). Their daughter Carol made *aliyah* after college (Brandeis), changed her name to Shai, and mar-

ried Ricky Abramson, a Canadian *oleh* (immigrant) who changed his name to Raki. In early 1992, the Abramsons had the Waxman's first grandchild, Ari Barak ben Raki Abramson. Waxman muses that his daughter and son-in-law have gone through a "reverse Ellis Island transformation." "When I talk to [Raki's] father, he wants to know how Ricky and Shai are. And I say: 'Ricky and Shai? You mean Raki and Carol.'"

Janet Kessler was a founding member of Congressional Wives for Soviet Jewry, and has worked actively on behalf of Syrian Jewry. Waxman remembers that in the early days of the Soviet Jewry committee, his wife would host get-togethers at their home, where participants would place calls to Jewish refuseniks in Russia. In 1987, the Waxmans went on a political junket to Syria. Visiting the Jewish quarter of Damascus on Shabbat, they were met by the neighborhood's Jewish residents, who took Mrs. Waxman into their homes and voiced their grave concerns.

In 1991, in what he termed "the most difficult vote of his entire career," Henry Waxman voted against the Gulf resolution. Speaking of that vote, he said: "I'm anguished by it. War [with Iraq] may be inevitable, [but] I just can't vote for war. I'm just not convinced that war is our only option . . . I don't think we should say diplomacy is at a dead end."

Waxman's most recent crusade began in early 1994, when he "lined up the chief executive officers of leading tobacco companies and accused them of adding nicotine and other substances to cigarettes and of lying in their testimony." After the Republican take-over of Congress in November 1994, Waxman held one last hearing as subcommittee chair on smokeless tobacco. In January 1995, Representative Thomas Bliley, Republican of Virginia, took over as Commerce Committee chair. Said Bliley after assuming the post: "I don't think we need any

more legislation regulating tobacco." Waxman's response was typically cutting: "He's acting like he's taking over the Tobacco Committee, not the Health Committee."

Working in a minority for the first time in his congressional career, Waxman remained both philosophical and optimistic: "We have to recognize that we will be a permanent minority unless we put forward our agenda in a way the American people can understand it." During his many years in Congress, Henry Waxman has been a true leader of the House Democrats. Feared by some, respected by all, he has been, from day one, a champion of liberal causes. He has not always been immediately successful. As a colleague remarked: "At the beginning of every year, he'll ask for the sky. And when he gets only the moon instead of the whole sky, he still ends up getting more than most legislators get in ten years."

One of the most "Jewishly Jewish" members of the Congressional Minyan, Waxman understands that his training and upbringing have had a great impact on his career: "I find in our liturgy an ancient foreshadowing of President George Bush's famous call for a kinder and gentler society. In all our prayers we ask Him 'who makes peace Above to grant peace also unto us and to all our people.' The commentators point out that peace means not merely the absence of open conflict, but the presence of justice, compassion, harmony, and wholeness."

References

- Interview with Henry Waxman, March 1992.
Almanac of American Politics, 1976-1998.
Current Biography Year Book, 1992, pp. 600-604.
Los Angeles Times, April 25, 1990, E 1:1; January 13, 1991, A 6:3.
National Journal, March 3, 1989 pp. 577-581.
New Republic, July 7, 1986, pp. 17-19.