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Wilson testifies, but Waxman takes the spotlight

BY LISA FRIEDMAN, Washington Bureau

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WASHINGTON - Valerie Plame Wilson may have been the star Friday on Capitol Hill, but it was Los Angeles Democrat Henry Waxman who claimed center stage.

"They made you collateral damage," Waxman told Wilson, the mysterious secret agent who was "outed" after her husband accused the Bush administration of exaggerating intelligence claims in Iraq.

"Your career was ended. Your life may have been in jeopardy, and they didn't seem to care," Waxman said of the Bush administration, whom both Wilson and Democrats blame for blowing her cover as a covert CIA agent.

"I find that troubling, that in their zeal for their political positioning that there (was) a lot of collateral damage around, including a war that didn't have to be fought," he said.

Waxman's critics called the hearing pure political theater. Still, they acknowledged, it was a heck of a show.

"Henry is doing just what one might have expected him to do. He is becoming the administration's worst nightmare," said Norman Ornstein, a political analyst with the conservative American Enterprise Institute think tank in Washington, D.C.

"As far as I know, there wasn't any new information today. But public attention means public pressure, and that's what Henry Waxman does best," said Jack


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Video: Valerie Plame talks to Congress




Pitney, political science professor at Claremont



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at Clarendon McKenna College.

Wilson's testimony before Waxman's House Oversight and Government Reform Committee marked the first time the former spy has broken her silence since conservative columnist Robert Novak revealed her identity four years ago.

Yet while one columnist dubbed it a "Garbo speaks" moment, Wilson

ultimately shed little light on the leak case.

Rather, pundits said the hearing did more to spotlight Waxman's style as the newly minted chairman of one of the most powerful committees in Congress.

Since January, Waxman has launched inquiries into Iraq reconstruction contract fraud, pharmaceutical pricing and government interference in climate change - almost all based on detailed and meticulous research performed by his staff.

On Friday, however, the Beverly Hill lawmaker, who once hauled tobacco giants before Congress to say under oath that they didn't believe nicotine was addictive, showed he hasn't lost his flair for the dramatic.

"Waxman, with all due respect to (House Speaker) Nancy Pelosi, has been the star for Democrats since they took control," said University of Virginia political science professor Larry Sabato.

"He has put the oversight back in Congress," Sabato said.

Charging that Republicans had abdicated oversight of their own party while leading the majority under the Bush administration, Sabato said Waxman's investigations are high-profile affairs.

That's because Waxman's inquiries into Halliburton, drug pricing and the handling of Hurricane Katrina "hit home," the political science professor said.

"It's basic corruption and people understand that. People understand greed," he said.

At the same time, others note that as a legislator Waxman has concentrated on technical open-government bills and not partisan potshots.

Last week alone the House approved four Waxman measures. One forces government agencies to be more responsive to Freedom of Information Act requests for public documents; another requires donors to presidential libraries to identify themselves. A third Waxman measure reverses a 2001 Bush decision that made it easier for presidents to shield their records from public scrutiny; the last strengthens protection for government whistleblowers.

All the measures passed with Republican support.

Ornstein said Waxman's legislation belies the congressman's reputation as a knee-jerk partisan.

"He is a smart, tenacious, aggressive investigator and legislator with strong views and a very strong belief in the role of Congress," Ornstein said.

"I think he is genuinely interested in uncovering wrongdoing."

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