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REGION: Issa poised for leading watchdog role

49th District congressman will chair government oversight if GOP retakes House

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By MARK WALKER - mlwalker@nctimes.com North County Times - Californian | Posted: Saturday, September 4, 2010 11:00 pm | (44) Comments | Print

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North County Rep. Darrell Issa is on the cusp of heading the House Government Reform and Oversight Committee. The Vista Republican talked about that prospect during a recent interview at his Vista office. (Photo by Hayne Palmour IV - Staff Photographer)

Bio

Darrell Issa entered politics came in 1998, when he spent \$12 million of his own money trying to unseat U.S. Sen. Barbara Boxer.

He lost in the primary, but the self-made millionaire established his Republican credentials in that race and handily won election to Congress two years later.

A self-made millionaire, Issa bankrolled the 2003 recall of Gov. Gray Davis, and was expected to run to replace him until Arnold Schwarzenegger entered the race.

The 56-year-old Cleveland native became a millionaire through his company, Directed Electronics, which markets the Viper alarm featuring Issa's voice saying "Please step away from the car."

He divested his interest in the company after being elected, but remains involved in several businesses and property holdings and has a large number of stocks and bonds, according to his financial disclosure statements. His net worth based on those documents is a minimum of \$150 million.

Issa served in the U.S. Army, leaving the service in 1980 as a captain. He attended Kent State University and Siena Heights College and has a degree in business administration.

His wife is Kathy Issa and the couple have one son, William.

After a fairly lackluster five terms in office, Rep. Darrell Issa is ready to make his mark in Congress.

With his own re-election a virtual certainty, the self-made millionaire is on the cusp of becoming one of the most powerful lawmakers in Washington ---- and a potential nightmare for the Obama administration.

If Republicans reclaim the majority in the House this fall, as most political observers say is likely, Issa will become chairman of the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee he joined four years ago.

Issa faces token opposition from Democrat Howard Katz of Temecula, Libertarian Mike Paster of Fallbrook and American Independent Party candidate Dion Clark. None has much money to spend, and the Democratic Party is not active in the Katz campaign.

Assuming his re-election, what has been a loud bark from the Vista resident whose 49th Congressional District encompasses much of North County and Southwest Riverside County is expected to morph into a ferocious bite.

As the ranking Republican on the oversight committee, he's issued dozens of calls for investigations over the last two years, most of which have gone nowhere.

But as chairman of the committee with broad subpoena power, a large staff, the authority to investigate whatever he wants and no reticence about using that clout, Issa could be a formidable administration watchdog, according to Brandon Arnold, director of government affairs at the Cato Institute, a libertarian public policy research organization in Washington.

"He certainly developed a reputation for being pretty aggressive in his role as the ranking Republican and that will only be amplified and we can expect him to be a real bulldog if he becomes chairman," Arnold said. "He's already been a headline grabber in calling for investigations into what is going on in government, and there are a lot of things happening that need more sunshine."

The grandson of Lebanese immigrants catapulted to national attention in 2003 when he bankrolled the recall of Gov. Gray Davis, using some of the millions he made through his car alarm company to fund the effort.

At age 56 and his political coming of age, Issa says he's no longer interested in the governor's mansion or a U.S. Senate seat. His destiny, the Cleveland native says, lies in Congress and his role on the oversight committee.

'Showboat'

Possible targets under an Issa chairmanship include a probe into what the administration may have promised Pennsylvania Democratic Rep. Joe Sestak to drop out of that state's U.S. Senate race earlier this year and the federal government's response to the Gulf oil spill. He also has the Postal Service in his sights.

Issa wants to close dozens, if not hundreds, of post offices and trim what he says is a vastly bloated, inefficient service rapidly becoming an anachronism in the age of electronic communication and private delivery services.

"I am trying to create transparency for the public," he said.

In a speech to Pennsylvania Republicans earlier this year, he said he wouldn't be targeting large corporations if he becomes chairman.

"I won't use it to have corporate America live in fear that we're going to subpoena everything," he said. "I will use it to get the very information that today the White House is either shredding or not producing."

Ryan Rudominer, a spokesman for the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee in Washington, called Issa a grandstander.

"The last thing taxpayers can afford are Washington Republicans back in power and a showboat like Issa abusing his office and ignoring gross misconduct from their powerful, corporate special-interest backers," he said.

'Aggressive'

A respected political science professor said Issa-led probes could benefit the country.

"He is going to be very aggressive in his oversight role," said Jack Pitney, a former Capitol Hill staffer and government professor at Claremont McKenna College in Los Angeles County. "An active oversight role can be very valuable in helping assure accountability."

Not so, Rudominer said.

"Instead of focusing on holding big corporations like British Petroleum accountable, if Issa and Republicans have their way, a Chairman Issa would use subpoenas and an 80-person staff to launch taxpayer-funded witch hunts against the president," he said.

Recent oversight committee chairmen who wielded their clout include Indiana Republican Dan Burton, who dogged the Clinton White House with investigations of the suicide of aide Vince Foster and the Whitewater land deal, and California Democrat Henry Waxman, who used his chairmanship to go after defense contractor Haliburton.

Shots fired

Issa used accountability in several instances during a recent 90-minute visit with a reporter at his Vista district office.

The well-groomed, well-spoken Issa, whose office shelves are lined with books and military mementos,

accused the White House of using propaganda in its claims that millions of jobs were saved and created under the \$787 billion stimulus spending passed by Democrats in 2009.

He says that can't be proven, and therefore it's illegal under federal law to spend taxpayer dollars to promote it.

While he said he does not believe the Obama administration is inherently corrupt, he does have serious concerns about practices such as the Sestak affair.

"What we have discovered was that it was business as usual," he said of reported job offers to Sestak to drop out of the Senate race. "But we also know it's illegal, and so the warning shots have been fired."

Issa is confident heading into the November election that the Republican Party will gain enough seats to take control of the House.

"I believe the American people are going to give us a slim majority, and slim is fine," said the man The New York Times recently dubbed the Annoyer in Chief. "It means there is going to be compromise."

Current affairs

During his time in office, Issa has co-sponsored far more bills than he's been chief author of, and his work on behalf of the district has largely concentrated on infrastructure and military needs.

Congressional watchdog groups rate him as a rank-and-file Republican whose voting record rarely goes against the wishes of party leadership.

Heading into 2011, Issa outlined the following positions:

-- The Army veteran said he believes the U.S. should withdraw all its forces from Iraq.

"They're not free to move around or to do any military job. There's still a significant amount of troops costing us billions of dollars in a country where the longer we stay the more they think we are an occupying force."

-- The administration should issue a definitive ultimatum to the Afghan government to rid itself of corruption and take responsibility for its own security.

"Afghanistan needs to be told we will teach you how to fish, but we won't fish for you. Sometimes you just have to walk away, cordon off a country and say we cannot fix all the problems."

-- His decision last year to not seek any earmarks has hampered his ability to fund projects in the district.

"It's hurt," he said, adding that there needs to be a better way for lawmakers to seek funding for specific projects in their district that are fully vetted before being funded and not inserted at the last minute into spending measures.

-- A panel modeled after the military base realignment and closure commission should be formed to examine and lead a wholesale reform of the Postal Service. The commission's plan could not be amended, with Congress forced to either support or reject its decisions.

"We have thousands of too many post offices and people on the payroll with nothing for them to do," he said. "I want to get rid of the excess."

Exposure

Issa became nationally known when he bankrolled the 2003 recall of Gov. Davis.

That led to appearances with Bill Maher on HBO, and in the last two years, he has appeared frequently on Fox News, MSNBC and had recurring stints on "Real Time with Bill Maher."

The relationship between Maher and Issa is at first blush a curious one. Issa is a practicing Christian, an Army veteran and married father of one. Maher is single, a comedian, favors legalizing drugs and challenges religious beliefs of any kind.

Despite those differences, Issa says the two have developed a mutual respect.

With his ascent in national stature and name familiarity, Issa said he believes he could have won the Republican nomination for U.S. Senate had he chosen to run this year.

But his destiny lies in his House service, he said.

"I think I can make my committee better at making sure your money is not wasted," he said. "That is what I think will be my legacy."

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