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## Dingell to set record for time in the House

*BY TODD SPANGLER  
FREE PRESS WASHINGTON STAFF*

WASHINGTON -- Cal Ripken hadn't been born yet, the Berlin Wall hadn't been built and Japanese cars weren't on U.S. roads when John Dingell began his congressional career.

In 1955, Detroit's population had just peaked at 2 million.

And a lanky, 6-foot-4 lawyer who split time growing up between Gesu Parish on Detroit's west side and Capitol Hill went after his white whale in Congress: It was universal health care -- the Moby Dick that bedeviled his dad until he died and John Jr. replaced him.

Fifty-four years later, Dingell, at 82, is still at it, new hip, new knee, bad back and all -- and on Wednesday he will have been at it longer than anyone in the history of the U.S. House of Representatives: 19,420 days.

Put another way: Ripken, baseball's record-setting Iron Man with 2,632 straight games, has nothing on John David Dingell Jr.

"One of the giants," is how congressional scholar Norm Ornstein describes him, a throwback to the fearsome committee chairmen of old with their masterful grasp of procedure and policy.

At his office Dingell graciously greets you, the frame that belies the nickname Big John is stooped as he walks slowly to his desk, surrounded by elk antlers, caribou heads and a wild boar taken in Georgia, the bounty of a lifetime of hunting.

They aren't the only trophies. A markup of the Clean Air Act of 1990. The gavel he used to preside over the House when it created Medicare in 1965.

Since his defeat in the Democratic Caucus in November by rival Henry Waxman of California, he's no longer riding herd over the Energy and Commerce Committee with its jurisdictional sweep. And it's questionable whether Dingell -- who built a reputation as an indefatigable advocate for his hometown Detroit automakers and a fierce and sometimes unfairly harsh questioner of agency bureaucrats -- will instill that kind of fear and respect ever again.

But he's still at it, his mind sharp, his eyes bright with the tales of old battles.

"My health is good enough," he said. "I have the ability to do things. There's a lot my people need."

Every Congress since his first full term in 1957 he has introduced a bill -- his dad's bill -- for universal health care, and health care reform is a top priority for President Barack Obama's and the Democratic majority in the House and Senate. Now, it's Dingell's issue to run.

### 'A fierce defender'

Dingell's list of accomplishments is daunting. He built the modern Energy and Commerce Committee and expanded its scope; he staked out ground as the leading conservationist in Congress, helping to write the National Wilderness Act, the Water Quality Act, the Clean Air Act amendments of 1990, even the Energy Policy and Conservation Act of 1975, which set the first miles-per-gallon vehicle standards.

He investigated the Environmental Protection Agency, the Food and Drug Administration and General Dynamics' charge to the Pentagon to pay a top executive's dog-sitting bills. His so-called Dingell-grams -- letters to bureaucrats insisting on specific answers to his lists of questions in a tight timeframe -- are legendary, as has been his reputation for high-handedness and doggedness in pursuit of his goals.

And he always has been a contradictory political figure. A classic liberal Democrat, he has joined with Republicans at times to achieve his goals.

Voting for the Civil Rights Act of 1964, he opposed busing in metro Detroit; an avid conservationist, he opposed gun control, and he belonged to (once was even a board member of) the National Rifle Association.

The Politics in America yearbook in 1982 called Dingell "a complex man, stubborn and vindictive on occasion, self-confident to the point of arrogance, a skilled legislative craftsman and one of the most effective House members."

Almost everyone in Washington knows how Dingell -- whose district had migrated west and south and who now makes his home in Dearborn -- kept a photo of the Earth from space over his desk at Energy and Commerce. When asked what the committee's jurisdiction was, he'd point to it.

"A very, very fierce defender," said Frank Zarb, who was energy czar under President Gerald R. Ford and sparred regularly with Dingell and his committee. "If he didn't like you, you knew it, and if he didn't like what you were doing, you knew it and you knew it quick."

Zarb was packing to leave Washington in 1976 when he found Dingell at his door -- a box in his hands. Inside was a rifle.

His wife joked that Dingell finally had come to shoot them.

It was a gift. And though Zarb didn't hunt, Dingell said he'd take care of that. The two became fast friends.

## Hard feelings

For someone who has been so successful, however, there's no getting around the anger Dingell can and has generated. President George W. Bush once jokingly greeted Dingell as "the biggest pain in the ass" on the Hill. (Dingell thanked him.)

Dr. Bernadine Healy, the health editor for U.S. News & World Report who clashed with Dingell when she was head of the National Institutes of Health from 1991 to 1993, called the chairman and his staff unscrupulous in how they went after Dr. David Baltimore and Dr. Robert Gallo on questions of scientific integrity.

"They didn't have anything there to go after," she said. Eventually, government panels cleared both men. Dingell stands by the probes.

Then there are the hard feelings created by his representation of the auto industry. He's married to the former Deborah Insley, who works for General Motors' philanthropic arm. Among the first bills he

introduced in 1955 was a tax break for car buyers, and for the past four decades he has been the auto industry's champion on Capitol Hill, especially on fuel-economy regulations.

Said Dan Becker, director of the Safe Climate Campaign, Dingell "didn't do the industry any favors" as gas-sipping Japanese imports moved in.

But while Dingell and the industry fought moves to increase gas mileage or other rules, people who worked with Dingell say it was often he who pushed automakers to change. In 2004, he told the Detroit Economic Club he wouldn't "always be here to watch that simmering pot" on fuel standards and they should "take steps now to reduce the heat."

They didn't. After the Senate passed tougher fuel rules in 2007, Dingell and the industry won some concessions -- but only after he told automakers they would have to accept change.

"Name me a congressman on either side of the aisle who doesn't try to protect his local constituency," said Rep. Joe Barton, a Texas Republican who, for two years, chaired Energy and Commerce with the GOP in control of the House.

Barton has fought with Dingell, battled over legislation, disagreed on policy or protocol. But if he'd had a vote in the caucus where Waxman took the chairmanship, Barton said, he would have voted for Dingell.

## Continued effectiveness

Certainly, that ability to form winning coalitions is a big part of the Dingell mystique. So is his ability to use parliamentary procedure. He sees the common ground on an issue, digs in and works the room for votes.

It hasn't always worked. Consider the loss to Waxman for the committee chair. He also came up short on the floor last year to authorize casinos in Port Huron and Romulus (in his district) -- a vote that split Michigan's delegation and raised questions about whether Dingell still had it.

Rep. Bart Stupak, a Menominee Democrat who chairs the Oversight and Investigations Subcommittee, said there is no question of Dingell's continued effectiveness. Or that he'll be needed in the fight for a new health care plan for America.

"After all these years, it's still Mr. Dingell," Stupak said.

In his office, Dingell snacks on a sandwich of peanut butter and mayonnaise -- like his mother used to make. The photo of the Earth from space is missing. He's not sure where it is. His staff has been cut.

But he still comes in every day and, at least now, isn't thinking about whether there's another term in 2010.

"You don't have to be a big wheel around here," he said. "You have to know how the place works and how to make things happen."

Contact **TODD SPANGLER** at [tspangl@freepress.com](mailto:tspangl@freepress.com). Staff writer Justin Hyde contributed to this report.

## Additional Facts

Congressional records

- On Wednesday, Rep. John Dingell will surpass the late Jamie Whitten as the longest-serving member of the U.S. House of Representatives ever, with 19,420 days on the job. Here are the top 10 record-holders in order of length of service after Wednesday:

**Dingell**, D-Mich.

**Whitten**, D-Miss.

**Carl Vinson**, D-Ga.

**Emanuel Celler**, D-N.Y.

**Sam Rayburn**, D-Texas

**Joseph Cannon**, R-Ill.

**Sidney Yates**, D-Ill.

**Wright Patman**, D-Texas

**Adolph Sabath**, D-Ill.

**John Conyers**, D-Mich.

Only Conyers remains in office -- giving Michigan the top two seniority spots in the House.

- All-time leaders: The late Carl Hayden of Arizona had nearly 57 years of service (20,773 days to be exact) spread out over the House and the Senate. The still-serving West Virginia Sen. Robert Byrd (20,490 days) went first to the House in 1953 and to the Senate in 1959. Byrd could catch up to Hayden's record in November.

*Source: Free Press research*

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