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## Crusader: Rep. Dingell to become America's longest-serving congressman

### On Wednesday, 'giant of the Congress' to mark record 19,420th day on the job at Capitol Hill

Deb Price / The Detroit News

**WASHINGTON** -- It takes three ingredients to become the longest serving member of "The People's House" -- and John Dingell of Michigan, who achieves that milestone Wednesday, excelled at each.

First, you have to love the job: grueling hours, the weekly round trip between Michigan and Capitol Hill, the challenges facing the nation and the elderly constituent who has lost a Social Security check.

Second, even if you've done the first very well, you have to win election every two years. The Dearborn Democrat has won 28 general elections, plus three especially tough primaries.

And third, even if you do the first two exceptionally well, you have to start young: Dingell, now 82, was elected in 1955 at age 29.

"I had a very difficult district, and I didn't think I was going to last very long," Dingell said in a recent interview in his Capitol Hill office decorated with hunting trophies and photos of him with presidents.

"But God has been very good to me, and the people have been very good to me. And there have always been things to do."

On Wednesday, John Dingell -- nicknamed "Big John" for his literal and figurative stature -- begins his 19,420th day on the job. That beats the record of the longest serving member of the House of Representatives set by Jamie Whitten of Mississippi, who left Congress in 1995.

Fortunately for Michigan, Dingell wasn't a benchwarmer.

In casting nearly 24,400 votes, he has amassed a remarkable list of legislative accomplishments, especially concerning health care and environmental protection.

During his tenure as chairman of the House Energy and Commerce Committee, Dingell was feared by "those doing all sorts of rascality," as he puts it.

His legendary investigations revealed bills to taxpayers from defense contractor General Dynamics for liquor and dog boarding in 1985, and from Stanford University for upkeep on a yacht in 1991.

Dingell, in what contributed to his ouster in late November as Energy and Commerce chairman, also long fought to moderate proposals for higher fuel economy standards that he believed would cost American autoworkers their jobs.

"He had a very strong investigative agenda. If you look at figures who have investigated the executive branch, he is one of the leaders of the Congress," said Fred Beuttler, the deputy historian of the House of Representatives.

"If you look over the history of the House, John Dingell stands out as one of the most effective chairmen."

Even without his chairman's gavel, Dingell will find ways to be exceptional, said Rep. Dale Kildee, D-Flint.

"John will not go away in the night," Kildee said. "Knowledge is power around here. That means he still has great power."

Dingell's career has spanned 11 presidents, starting with Dwight D. Eisenhower. Several offered him jobs. He also considered running for the Senate or governorship, or returning to his private law practice.

But the U.S. House of Representatives took hold of him. He became a congressional page -- errand boy -- at age 12, learning parliamentary procedures and secret shortcuts through the Capitol, and he never let go.

"I thought about running for other things," Dingell said. "I was offered jobs by Kennedy and other presidents. But I like the House. I grew up here. My dad was a member. I have a particular feeling for it.

"I have had disappointments. I've had troubles. But none of them was of the character that it would have forced me out of here."

#### **Carrying on dad's commitments**

Dingell served in the Army during World War II, supervised elevator operators at the Capitol during college and trapped bears and fought fires as a park ranger.

After graduating from Georgetown University's law school, he became an assistant prosecutor back home, in Wayne County.

Dingell's start in politics began with a heartbreak that turned into a powerful motivator.

His father, a House member, died suddenly of a heart attack in 1955.

Dingell waited a week before jumping into a crowded primary -- winning that, and the special general election as well.

"John was his father's son," said Don Riegle, a former senator from Michigan who served in the House with Dingell.

"He was given the chance to carry on for his father. That's a special thing when you feel you are carrying on your dad's commitments, beliefs and name. You can see that in John -- the depth and intensity is in his DNA."

### **New role won't deter Dingell**

Like the man he still calls "Pop," Dingell devoted his career to helping working people.

In 1957, he introduced a bill to create national health insurance. That was his father's dream, and the son reintroduced the bill in every subsequent Congress.

In 1965, he presided over the House passage of Medicare. The gavel given to him from that day remains on his desk, more than 40 years later.

By the 1970s, Dingell was moving up the committee ladder and threw himself into crafting some of the nation's most important environmental laws.

In 1975, a turbulent time when the country was reeling from oil shortages, he became the chairman of the energy and power subcommittee, where he developed a reputation as an activist chairman who pushed legislation to help the president deal with the oil crisis.

In 1981, he was chosen to be the chairman of the Energy and Commerce Committee.

When the Republican revolution of 1994 swept Democrats out of majority control, Dingell stayed effective, trading on the deep ties he had to long-serving Republicans.

Dingell recouped the chairman's gavel after the 2006 elections returned Democrats to power, and turned his attention to tainted medicines and foods from China.

But his latest chairmanship proved to be short-lived.

He was ousted as chairman by a fellow Democrat. The consolation prize was a "peculiar" title, as he calls it, of "chairman emeritus."

He wishes he were still chairman, but Dingell said he got things done before he was a chairman, and can do it again. Under a deal worked out with Waxman, Dingell will take a leading role on health care reform -- one of President Barack Obama's priorities.

"I will have a little extra staff and prestige, and that is a tool you use to push things," Dingell said of his new role.

"The nice thing about having been around here a while is you learn how the place works. You learn the buttons that you push and the levers you pull. ... I am going to try to use that experience to make things happen."

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