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## Rep. Dingell Makes History

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Big John has outlasted them all.

After 53 years in the House, Rep. John Dingell (D-Mich.) will stand alone today as the longest-serving Representative in history. Dingell will break the late Rep. Jamie Whitten's (D-Miss.) record and surpass the other 10,000 or so legislators who have served in the House since 1789.

"Eighty-two years ago, I hit the jackpot," he said this week in an interview, looking back on his life. "I was born in the United States of America. That's the greatest thing that ever happened to me."

Dingell, who last year was replaced as chairman of the Energy and Commerce Committee, where he had been ensconced as the top Democrat since 1981, said he plans to stick around.

"At different times I've thought about moving on, but there's always been something to do," he said.

And the dean of the House has had an unrivaled résumé over the decades — as the chief defender of the Detroit auto industry, a stout conservationist and a man who has made his name in fighting to expand health care for all.

Dingell's career both inside and outside Congress, outlined in a 35-page timeline presented by his office, offers a snapshot of the history of modern America.

In 1933, his father, John Dingell Sr., took office in the depths of the Great Depression when President Franklin D. Roosevelt launched the New Deal.

Young John Dingell walked the House floor for the first time at age 6. He became a House page when he turned 12, and he was in the chamber with his father in 1941 when Roosevelt gave the "Day of Infamy" speech that launched the United States into World War II.

Less than three years later, Dingell was drafted into the Army, and his unit of 210 soldiers was decimated in the Battle of the Bulge. Dingell, who spent the battle in the hospital suffering from meningitis, was one of 10 survivors.

Before he was elected to the House, Dingell was a park ranger — where he trapped bears, blew up beaver dams and fought forest fires — and a prosecutor. Both career paths turned out to be good training for what would come next.

After Dingell was elected to the House in 1955 to succeed his late father, he was stuck on what most would consider a backwater committee — the Merchant Marine and Fisheries Committee, which no longer exists. But Dingell used the post to make his mark on landmark conservation legislation, often working with Republicans who were then deep in the minority. "Hardly any Democrats would show up to do these things," he said.

He would play major roles in writing the Clean Air, Clean Water, National Environmental Policy and Endangered Species acts.

Dingell also, like his father before him, introduced legislation every Congress to provide universal health care, and he presided in 1965 over the vote creating Medicare.

After taking the Commerce chairmanship in 1981, Dingell made his committee known for fierce investigations and for his “Dingell-grams” warning departments to shape up.

Dingell, who has been a fierce defender of the House rules and regular order, also has a reputation for working across the aisle in what seems to be a bit of a lost art.

When Dingell took the committee gavel, he said he was “very scared” and spoke to a mentor, then-House Parliamentarian Lou Deschler. Deschler gave Dingell two rules.

“The first rule is you’ve got to be fair. The second is you’ve got to appear fair. ... I was impeccably fair.”

Dingell fought with Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) in 2007 over major energy legislation, when at one point a frustrated Dingell urged Pelosi to let him build a bipartisan bill that would include new auto fuel-economy standards but also protect the industry from layers of state regulation.

“I’m going to get you a bill, not a Democratic bill, but a Democratic accomplishment,” he said to Pelosi.

Pelosi kept a tight hold over the energy bill, and the dust-up helped lead to Rep. Henry Waxman’s (D-Calif.) ascension to the top of the committee after the 2008 elections.

But Dingell continues to urge a bipartisan approach, pointing to successes such as the consumer product safety bill that passed last year without opposition.

“People don’t judge you whether you get a bill,” he said. “They judge you on what you get done.”

Dingell said he has always told his staff: “You go find the facts. We will cook the politics to suit the facts.”

Dingell said that too often, especially recently, the facts have been cooked to suit the politics by partisans on the far left and far right.

“The best legislating is done in the middle,” he said. “Everyone around here’s got something to say.”

Dingell, who recently signed on to a letter to House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer (D-Md.) urging a return to regular order, blames former Speaker Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.) for warping the rules after the Republican revolution in 1994. “Gingrich started out this system of cooking the rules,” he said.

Dingell speaks with frustration about episodes such as the Medicare drug bill, which was drafted by Republicans behind closed doors.

“They wouldn’t let us in the room,” he said. Dingell voted against the drug benefit, even though he had first put in a bill to add prescription drugs to Medicare in 1966.

Dingell still speaks positively of Pelosi, despite their frequent sparring. “I happen to like Nancy,” he said. “Nancy’s a good Speaker. Her history is not yet written. This session is going to be a test of her ability. I’m going to try and make her a success.”

With the economy in a tailspin, Dingell, who remembers the Great Depression and refers to it frequently when discussing the current crisis, recalls his warning in 1999 when Congress and President Bill Clinton repealed part of the Depression-era Glass-Steagall Act, which limited the activities of commercial banks.

“I warned it would create an economic calamity. ... That’s exactly what freed up the banks to do all the stupid things they did.”

There are a few important goals left in his mind. Dingell is still trying to save the auto industry — noting that every other country is helping out their automakers during the fiscal crisis — and he hopes to put a few more capstones on his career, starting with enacting universal health care.

In fact, perhaps his biggest defeat came in 1993, when Clinton's health care legislation died in Dingell's committee. Dingell blames that failure on dithering by White House officials and hundreds of millions of dollars spent by the insurance industry to kill it. "I lost it by one vote and I couldn't get it," Dingell said with intensity and regret.

But he sees signs of hope. The business community is starting to understand that the U.S. health care system creates a competitive disadvantage. He notes that the Detroit auto industry spends \$1,600 per vehicle on health care, compared with \$750 on steel. If they had \$1,600 to invest in the company, "they'd be flush," Dingell said.

"I'm going to work like hell" to pass it, Dingell said.

Dingell also said he wants to get funding for a national park in his district commemorating the War of 1812 in time for the bicentennial and to complete a fish and wildlife refuge there.

And despite talk that he could be replaced by another Dingell, either his powerful wife, Debbie, or one of his four children, Big John sounds like he wants to stick around and set a few more records.

"There's an old Polish saying, 'Before you sell the bear's hide, you first have to shoot the bear,'" he said. "This bear's doing pretty good."

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