

# The Alligator

## Mean, smart, tough, and blunt — meet Big John Dingell of Michigan

By JACK TORRY  
Blade Staff Writer

**WASHINGTON** — As reports of insider trading shook the securities industry in the spring of 1987, Rep. John Dingell rose to address a gathering of senior executives of securities firms. Like a stern and disapproving father, Big John, as the powerful Michigan Democrat is known on Capitol Hill, gazed out at his audience and told them curtly:

"This is not a speech in praise of the integrity of the securities industry, dismissing you to go off to cocktail parties and continue as before. And don't bother telling me, 'Dingell, it can't be done,' because if you don't immediately set to putting your houses in order, it will be done for and to you."

No more than five minutes later, the imposing, 6-foot-3-inch Congressman Dingell abruptly left the room.

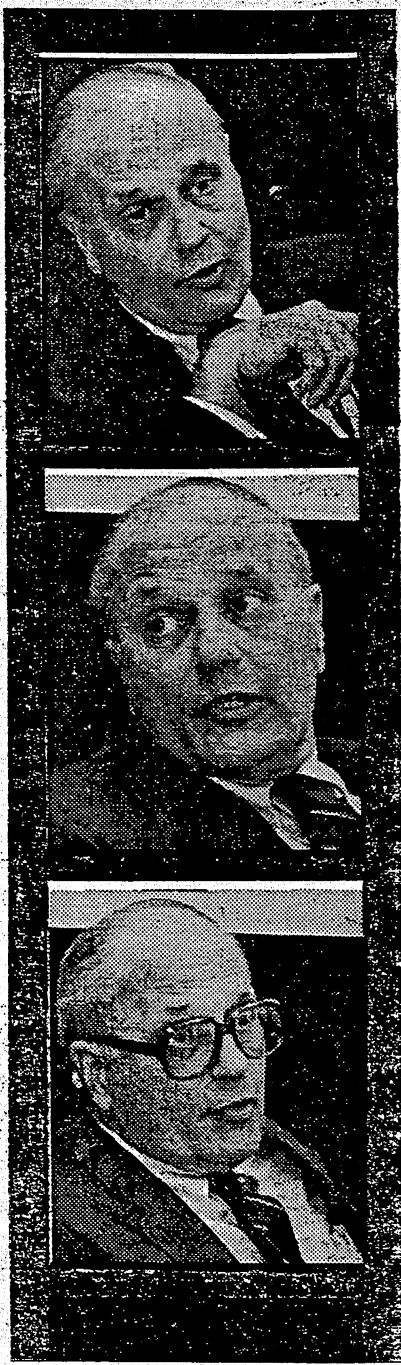
**FOR THIS**, the securities executives had paid a speaking fee. In return, they had been treated to a typical John Dingell performance: brusque, blunt, and belligerent.

"In Washington, which is a town of backstabbers, it's refreshing to have a guy look you in the eye and tell you what he's going to do," says Stan Brand, former counsel to the House of Representatives.

For more than three decades, John Dingell has used his bluntness, his intellect, and the sheer force of his personality to fight his way to the pinnacle of power in the House of Representatives.

As chairman of the Energy and Commerce Committee, he wields decisive influence on a wide range of issues: from the environment to natural gas, from the automobile industry to the securities industry, from airbags to television broadcasters.

He also has considerable clout as chairman of the House Oversight and Investigations Subcommittee. From that post, he has launched inquiries that have forced senior officials of President Reagan's administration to resign. His power is such that it may be exceeded in all of Congress only by House Speaker Jim Wright of Texas, and Dan Rostenkowski, chairman of the House



— Blade Photos by Bruce Sinner

Rep. John Dingell:

"This is not a place for the weak, for the foolish, for the stupid."

Ways and Means Committee, which writes the nation's tax laws.

**HE HAS SO** expanded his two committees' scope that more than

half of the legislation approved by Congress passes before his steely gaze. Want a change in the Clean Air Act? See John Dingell. Interested in a new securities' law? Ask John Dingell. How about relaxing the Fairness Doctrine for broadcasters? Check with John Dingell.

Some suggest Mr. Dingell's committees have unlimited reach. Rep. Dennis Eckart, Ohio Democrat of Mentor, a large mural-sized photograph in a congressional hearing room. Taken by a satellite in orbit, it shows Earth swathed in clouds. "The story is that's John's view of his jurisdiction."

The high and the mighty do not awe John Dingell. For example:

▶ James Watt, former interior secretary: Big John once threatened to hold him in contempt of Congress.

▶ Anne Burford, former Environmental Protection Agency director: Big John's investigation forced her resignation.

▶ Michael Deaver, former White House aide: His testimony before Big John's committee led to his conviction of perjury.

If anything, Mr. Dingell, whose temper is legendary throughout Washington, is the most widely feared member of the House.

"He's a bully," says Joan Claybrook, president of Public Citizen, a Ralph Nader lobbying group. Leon Billings, a former aide to Sen. Edmund Muskie of Maine, says, "John Dingell is a vindictive man with a very long memory and feels no obligation or reason to be less vindictive or have a shorter memory."

**SUCH DESCRIPTIONS** tend to make Big John smile. He likes to describe himself as a "poor Polish lawyer from Detroit."

He makes no secret that he relishes his reputation as the House's meanest, smartest, toughest, and bluntest man. On the wall of his Dearborn office is a cartoon depicting an alligator with a gavel sitting behind a committee table watching several mutilated witnesses. It snaps: "Thank you, gentlemen, for your very enlightening testimony."

"This is not a place for the weak, for the foolish, for the stupid," Mr. Dingell says. "It is a place which requires a great deal of toughness, not infrequently a fairly good dollop





*Congressman Dingell and Rep. Toby Moffett of Connecticut argue over the need for standby gasoline rationing in 1979*

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of courage, a good appreciation of history, and an awful lot of savvy. I won't tell you that at all times that I'm the most pleasant man in the House, because I don't find that pleasantness on all occasions gets you anything other than abuse."

**BECAUSE** of his power, and his willingness to take a position on virtually any issue, he has no shortage of enemies.

For years he has defended the auto industry and fought to keep expensive air bags out of cars. That brought him into a lengthy conflict with Ms. Claybrook, the head of the National Highway Safety Administration under President Carter. Her opposition annoyed him so much that he called the U.S. secretary of transportation three different times to demand her firing.

On another occasion, he confront-

ed a Claybrook ally, former Texas Congressman Bob Eckhardt. "When Joan comes to your office," Mr. Dingell asked, "where does she park her broom?" To which Mr. Eckhardt replied, "If she were a witch, she'd have turned you into a toad."

**RARELY DOES** John Dingell forget a slight. During the fight to revise the Clean Air Act, Mr. Din-

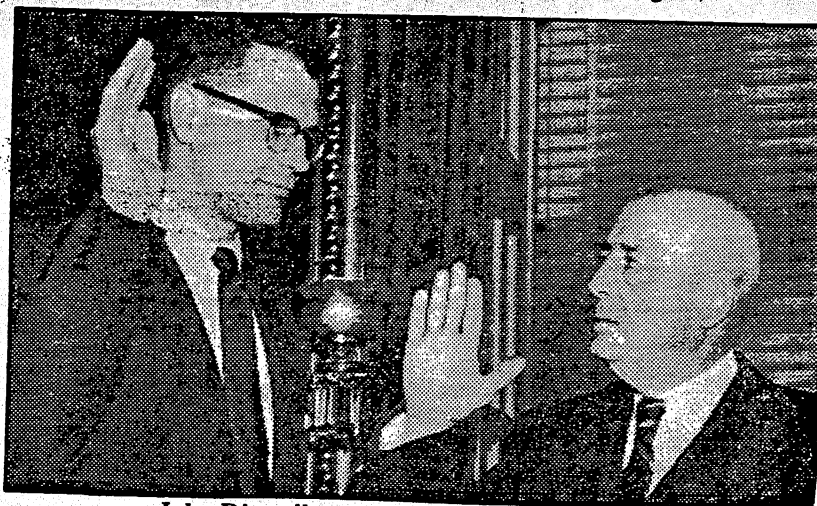
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**Joan Claybrook:**

"So many members of Congress are really boring. This guy is so interesting.

...  
He's a bully."



*John Dingell sworn in as a member of Congress by Speaker Sam Rayburn in 1955*



gell's opponents included Senator Muskie and Mr. Billings. Years later when Mr. Billings was making an unsuccessful effort to run for Congress from Maryland, he saw John Dingell, who abruptly told him, "I want you to know: I'll make sure I do everything I can to make certain you're not elected."

Mr. Dingell represents one of the most heavily industrialized congressional districts in the United States. The Ford Motor Co. headquarters are in Dearborn; the Detroit River south of Detroit is lined with automotive, steel, and chemical plants. He is a strong defender of the auto industry even though his critics say that he has taken his positions at the expense of the environment and driver safety.

**JOHN DINGELL** grew up in the House of Representatives. His father, John, Sr., was elected from the same district in 1932 and became a champion of Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal. Even today, the son is one of the House's last true New Dealers, saying, "I'm a Democrat, without any hyphens, prefixes, or suffixes."

In 1938, when John, Jr., was 13, his father arranged a job as a House page. That began a half-of-a-century of legislative education for the younger Dingell. Not only could he watch his father, a sponsor of the Social Security Act, but he saw firsthand the giants of the House: Sam Rayburn of Texas, Herbert Bonner of North Carolina, and Oren Harris of Arkansas, chairman of the forerunner of Mr. Dingell's committee, and in his words, "probably the best chairman I ever served with."

After serving in the army in World War II, he earned his law degree from Georgetown University in 1949, then served as an assistant Wayne County prosecutor.

**WITH HIS FATHER'S** sudden death in 1955, John, Jr., decided to run for the seat, and to nobody's surprise, was easily elected. He rarely has known any trouble getting re-elected since.

He quickly gravitated toward Energy and Commerce Committee, then known as Interstate and Foreign Commerce. Although he admired Mr. Harris, John Dingell says he often quarreled with the Arkansas Democrat. "You can always respect and admire ability," Mr. Dingell says.

To Mr. Dingell, the old House of Representatives was "a body where the best thing you could say about a man was that he is sincere, and the worst thing you could say about a man was that he was insincere."

Even now, friends and enemies insist when he gives his word, he intends to keep it.

"**THERE'S NOT** a whole lot of subtleties about John," says Congressman Eckart of Ohio. "If he tells you that he can help you, you can go to the bank."

John Dingell quickly developed the capacity to outrage any number of interest groups in Washington. Although he supported the 1970 Clean Air Act, he led the unsuccessful fight in 1977 to weaken some of its more stringent provisions. He backed the Endangered Species Act and the Marine Mammals Act, but is a National Rifle Association member and avid hunter who has decorated the walls of his congressional office with the stuffed heads of the animals he has shot, including the wild boar killed in Georgia with a .44 caliber pistol.

**HE DEVELOPED** an almost worshipful reverence for the House and the laws it passes. To him, an act of Congress is to be followed, not spurned and ignored.

"John Dingell, no matter how he views the Clean Air Act and his loss in 1977, would never suggest to anybody that they break the law because they disagree with it," says Mr. Billings. "He would be the first person in Congress to insist upon compliance with the law."

Although Mr. Dingell had been an admirer of Oren Harris, he had nothing but disdain for Harley Staggers of West Virginia, who succeeded Mr. Harris as chairman of the Commerce Committee. To Mr. Dingell and his close friend, Rep. John Moss of California, the committee staff was too small, committee members were totally unprepared for hearings, and the Oversight and Investigations subcommittee "rarely met and never investigated anybody."

By 1981 Mr. Dingell had consolidated his power with such skill that he and Mr. Moss "went out and staged a revolution" and toppled Mr. Staggers. Mr. Dingell became chairman and quickly struck: He fired incompetent staff members,

replacing them with able, bright, and hard-working people. He installed a computer and printing operation, despite slashing the committee budget by 25 per cent. Today, it is a universal truth that John Dingell operates the most effective committee in Congress with one of the largest and most capable staffs.

**THOSE WHO** work directly for him grow to admire him. "He's tough," says John Orlando, his administrative assistant. "He's demanding. But the biggest thing from the perspective of the staff, is that he's fair."

Mr. Dingell has used both the Energy and Commerce and Oversight committees to involve himself in virtually every major issue of this decade.

In particular, he is enraged that the Reagan administration has tolerated what he considers unfair trading practices with Japan and West Germany. He ardently supported Rep. Richard Gephardt's bid for president, in part, because the Missouri congressman favored retaliation against nations that place high tariffs on U.S. goods.

At the same time, Mr. Dingell insists he is not advocating a return to the protectionism of the Smoot-Hawley bill of the 1930s, which

many economists blame for causing the Great Depression.

"Any jackass that tells you I'm in favor of Smoot-Hawley is sick in the head," Mr. Dingell says. "My dad was one of those who repealed Smoot-Hawley and put in place reciprocal trade. I still think that's the way to go. Reciprocal trade says that we give up something, they give up something, and we are both enriched by it."

**DESPITE** Mr. Dingell's unquestioned power, when former House Speaker Thomas (Tip) O'Neill retired in 1984, the Michigan Democrat was not to be his successor. Although Congressman Eckart of Ohio insists that Mr. Dingell had relatively little interest in the job, Stan Brand says that Mr. Dingell wanted the post. His detractors say his bluntness and hard manners guaranteed that he would not have the votes to win. But there is no question that at age 62 he remains a match for anyone else in the House.

"He's been able to master a smaller universe and, in a sense, be more powerful," says Mr. Brand.

Even his detractors concede that. As Joan Claybrook admits with a laugh: "So many members of Congress are really boring. This guy is so interesting."