

Working Profile: Representative John D. Dingell

How a Huntsman Stalks His Legislative Prey

By NATHANIEL C. NASH

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WASHINGTON, June 3 — John D. Dingell's passion is hunting. He says he likes the solitude of the deep woods, the kinship of fellow hunters and matching his wits with those of a wild animal.

As the imposing 6-foot, 2-inch Democratic Congressman from Dearborn, Mich., sits at his desk, he is surrounded by evidence of that passion: a Russian wild boar, an antelope, a white-tailed deer, a wood duck, two pairs of elk antlers.

These and other hunting mementos seem to speak a parable about Mr. Dingell: By almost every account, he is one of the most feared and effective members of Congress, as well as perhaps one of the most complex.

Very Hot or Very Cold

Some say he hunts political foes and victories with the same enthusiasm he hunts his quarry afield. At the same time, he has befriended some of his former foes, and they him. And he has earned the fierce loyalty of a number of junior members on his Energy and Commerce Committee.

So people tend to run either very hot or very cold on John Dingell.

Mr. Dingell, 59 years old, has been in Congress for almost 32 years. He inherited the political mantle of his father, who also served in Congress, for watching over the well-being of Michigan's automobile industry. And for the last five years, he has been chairman of the Energy and Commerce Committee, which has perhaps a broader scope and jurisdictional mandate than any other House panel.

As such, Mr. Dingell has not only reached into a great variety of legislative issues, including most recently the toxic waste clean-up fund and the proposal to sell off Conrail, but has also built an investigative team, linked to his Oversight and Investigations Subcommittee, that has issued more than 100 subpoenas.

His targets have included the Environmental Protection Agency, the General Dynamics Corporation and other defense contractors, the Federal Home Loan Bank Board, the Securities and Exchange Commission and, most recently, Michael K. Deaver, the Reagan aide turned lobbyist.

"What I like about hunting is that you're on your own, matching wits," Mr. Dingell said in an interview.

Indeed, that typifies the Dingell style. It is not uncommon for a witness to come under intense questioning by the chairman. Some say they feel bullied. Others complain that the Dingell team springs too many surprises on them. Most, however, come away with respect for a worthy adversary.

"Sometimes I think he pulls some fast ones," said John Shad, chairman of the Securities and Exchange Commission. "But whatever else I could say, if I were in the trenches, I would want John Dingell on my side."



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While Mr. Dingell loves investigation, he says it must go hand-in-hand with the legislative process. He contends that his committee produces as much as 40 percent of the legislation passed every year by the House.

According to some members of Congress, that is a result of his committee's broad jurisdiction but also of Mr. Dingell's zeal for extending his reach; a tendency more and more members of Congress are describing as power-grabbing rather than legitimate jurisdiction. Mr. Dingell bristles at such suggestions.

Over the last few months, the hand of John Dingell has appeared in a succession of major legislative issues. And in almost every case, he has shown little willingness to compromise.

Conrail, Guns and Trade

Last month he killed a plan developed over a two-year period by Transportation Secretary Elizabeth Hanford Dole to sell the Government's 85 percent share in Conrail to the Norfolk Southern Corporation for \$1.2 billion.

In April he successfully fought against further restrictions on interstate transportation of handguns, a fight that was evidence of his long-time membership in and avid support for the National Rifle Association.

He has also been fighting for his own version of a five-year renewal of the fund for the toxic chemical clean-up program, even against the objections of two of his subcommittee chairmen.

And he has battled with the Ways and Means Committee, headed by Dan Rostenkowski, the Chicago Democrat who is considered one of the few equals to Mr. Dingell in the House, in writing the recently passed House trade bill that calls for strong retaliation against countries that exclude American companies from their markets.

Although Mr. Dingell plays down these rather frequent battles (perhaps much in the same way that he preferred not to be photographed with his hunting trophies for this article), other members of Congress say his aggressiveness tends to alienate him from some of his colleagues.

And such tactics obviously reflect his penchant for combat. "I always use the biggest rifle or the biggest shotgun I can take," Mr. Dingell said. "Because when I shoot something, I want it to go down. I don't want any cripples running around."

But the fact is that Mr. Dingell has gone head-to-head with some of his own committee colleagues and has succeeded only in wounding them — a situation that some say might come back to hurt him.

For example, Mr. Dingell has consistently opposed clear-air bills proposed by Henry A. Waxman, the California Democrat who is chairman of Mr. Dingell's Health and Environment Subcommittee. These include a bill for controlling acid rain that Mr. Waxman and 150 co-sponsors introduced in April.

Mr. Dingell has also fought battles over the renewal of the toxic fund law with James J. Florio, the New Jersey Democrat who is chairman of Mr. Dingell's Commerce, Transportation and Tourism Subcommittee.

"He did a fantastic job in exposing the corruption at E.P.A.," Mr. Waxman said. "But now he turns around and proposes to give them back authority they have proven incapable of handling. I find that very inconsistent."

Such an approach is often interpreted as favoring big industry, specifically the automobile industry, rather than the general public.

To such objections, Mr. Dingell says, "I was not sent here to destitute my district or destroy the auto industry."

A Big Question Mark

To be sure, Mr. Dingell's combative nature is not about to change. And according to some members, it places a big question mark over his expressed interest in becoming the next Speaker of the House.

"It is something that would be nice to cap my career," he said of the Speakership. "But I have the fault of being too blunt-spoken."

Nevertheless, Mr. Dingell said he might jump into the race if Jim Wright, the House Democratic leader who is currently considered the next likely Speaker, should falter.

That distant hope is perhaps best expressed by Mr. Dingell's staff, which refers to the boar's head, with its high, arching eyebrows, as the Jim Wright Boar.