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WASHINGTON—Early one morning in 1914, a police officer patrolling the train station in the one-stoplight town of Colorado Springs spotted a man, barely conscious, lying on a mattress on the floor of a baggage car.

"I'm sick," the stowaway pleaded. "I'm going to the Union Printer's Home. Can you take me there?"

The officer, a big cop named Kelleher, understood the seriousness of the man's plight. In 1914, tuberculosis was a death sentence for people from the squalid corners of the American cities where disease ran rampant. If this man was any different, it was only because he belonged to a labor union, and that gave him a place to die with some dignity and comfort.

Having no ambulance, Kelleher sent for a patrol wagon.

At that point in telling the story three-quarters of a century later, the tubercular man's son stopped for a moment, took off his glasses and wiped away tears that would no longer stay back.

Laid bare in that recollection of his father's illness was an intensely personal side of the fearsome Rep. John D. Dingell (D-Mich.).

It is a side of the man that rarely shows. Say the name Dingell on Capitol Hill, and you will hear stories about the instinct for political maneuver, the iron will, the tactics of intimidation, the acts of retribution—all the traits with which he has expanded his committee chairmanship into a legislative empire. In anger, he has been known to slam his gavel so hard that it exploded.

But a different Dingell emerges as he begins to talk about his father. Awe finds its way into his voice as he begins: "Pop was not an ideologue; he was a philosopher. He did a lot of thinking on things where you could make this country better, fairer."

John Dingell Sr. survived that bout of tuberculosis, defying a doctor's prediction that he would live six months, and went on to serve 12 terms in Congress, where he was an architect of New Deal programs. When Dingell was a 16-year-old House page in 1943, his father introduced what was perhaps his most radical measure—the first national

Point Man for Health Reform

Even critics concede that John Dingell may hold the key to Administration attempts to control the cost of medical care. The crusty Michigan Democrat will be measuring any plan against a tough standard—his father's dreams.



Dingell chairs a meeting on health issues with Hillary Rodham Clinton.

health insurance bill.

At the start of every two-year congressional session since 1955, when he won the seat left vacant by his father's death, John Jr., now 66, has introduced virtually the same legislation, putting it in the hopper again and again. It is H.R. 16, which is the number of the Detroit-area district that has been represented by father and son since 1932.

In the struggle that is about to begin over perhaps the knottiest problem on Washington's agenda—reform of America's health care-system—the dream of Dingell's father forms the crucible in which the chairman will test whatever program for health-care reform is brought forward by President Clinton.

Chairman of the many-tentacled House Energy and Commerce Committee, Dingell is arguably the second- or third-most important member of the House. His support is considered crucial to the success of Clinton's effort to stem the rising cost of medicine and make care more widely available and affordable.

Yet Dingell's preferred solutions to the health-care crisis are far more radical than any plan the Administration seems likely to adopt. That means Clinton will be faced with having to disabuse Dingell of ideas he has held for five decades or convince him that some less dramatic resolution is the best politicians can hope to sell to the public.

Dingell's enemies regard him as a demagogue and a bully, although few will say so on the record. Still, a House Democrat who is influential on the health issue concedes: "I don't like working with John Dingell. He's a difficult guy. But he's good at what he does, and you're not going to get a bill on the floor without his say-so."

Another indication of Dingell's power: Clinton's point man with Congress, legislative liaison Howard Paster, is a former United Auto Workers lobbyist with close ties to the chairman.

"The reason Howard Paster is [at the White House] is because of John Dingell. Most of his career is based on his relationship with John and Debbie Dingell [his wife and longtime General Motors lobbyist]," says one House Democratic aide.

Dingell's father developed an understanding of the deficiencies of private health care from his own experiences and from what he saw while growing up as

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the son of Polish immigrants in Detroit.

But when Dingell Sr. argued that basic health care was something the government owed its poorest and weakest citizens, he—along with Sens. Robert F. Wagner (D-N.Y.) and James E. Murray (D-Mont.), who joined in his national health-insurance proposal in 1943—was called a socialist and communist.

His son takes a hard-nosed tack aimed at a different constituency.

"I quit talking about the humanitarian concern, because nobody much seems to give a damn about that," Dingell says. "I talk now about the economic consequences. General Motors spends \$1,086 per car [to provide health benefits to its workers]. The auto companies are going broke on health care, and every other industry is having similar problems."

Not surprisingly, Dingell has strong ideas as to what types of health-care reform will actually work. He believes, for example, that only a single-payer system—in essence, a government-funded plan—has much chance to stemming rising costs. Scores of lawmakers on record as favoring a similar system.

The White House task force, meanwhile, is struggling to find another way because—among other things—a plan in which the government served as the single payer could drive insurance companies out of the health-care business. The Administration is drawing upon a theory called managed competition, which seeks to balance regulation and market forces, in part by setting up large purchasing groups that would give small employers, individuals and jobless people clout in dealing with health-care providers.

Dingell is openly scornful of the largely untested concept. He also dismisses Clinton's suggestions that the amount of money to be saved by reforming the health-care system would be enough to cover people who now are uninsured. "If you think you are going to pay for this through savings, you are making a grave error," he told an insurance industry conference earlier this month.

Yet Dingell insists that he is eager to work with Clinton, whatever plan the President produces. "I'm a practical fellow, and if what I can get done during this Congress



Associated Press

John Dingell Jr., who won a special election to fill a seat left vacant when his father John Sr. died, in swearing-in rehearsal ceremony in 1955 with House Speaker Sam Rayburn. Dingell won the seat at 29.

takes me in the direction I want to go, then I'll accept that," he contends. "I'll even take something that takes me a *liiiiittle* bit off the direction that I want to travel, if it's going to move me generally the direction I want to go."

Some would say that even that much openness to compromise is unusual for a man whose nicknames include "The Truck"—a reference both to his imposing 6-foot-3 stature and to the effect that he generally has on those who would stand in his way.

However, health care is an area where Dingell has been willing to forge unusual alliances to serve his purposes.

He has engaged in monumental battles with Rep. Henry A. Waxman (D-Los Angeles), who reigns over his own fiefdom as chairman of Energy and Commerce's health and environment subcommittee. Waxman's prowess at legislative street fighting rivals the chairman's, and he has bested Dingell when Los Angeles' desire for cleaner air has confronted Detroit's opposition to tougher auto-emission standards.

But last year, the two lawmakers put aside differences on other issues to produce legislation that

they called "Health Choice," which aimed at assuring all citizens basic health coverage under a single-payer system. It would have been financed by a form of national sales tax and employer contributions.

Dingell's father made his reputation on the tax-writing House Ways and Means Committee, where he rose to second-ranking Democrat and where he drafted more than 100 amendments to the Social Security Act. He also wrote major portions of the Wagner Act that created the legal foundation for the modern labor union and many of the laws that still govern banking regulation.

He wrote the 1943 health insurance act without a means of funding so that it would fall within the jurisdiction of what is now the Energy and Commerce Committee, where he thought it had its best chance of passage. When Dingell succeeded his father in a special election, that legislation was one of the reasons he asked for an assignment on the committee he now chairs.

"I thought it was a bill that should be moved, and I didn't think it would be moved if I weren't on the committee," Dingell says.

What is most remarkable about Dingell's chairmanship is the de-

gree to which he has extended the committee's already wide mandate—often over the protests of other lawmakers who viewed his legislative expansionism as a power grab. Within the broad categories of energy and commerce, its turf includes health, the environment, telecommunications, finance, transportation, hazardous materials, consumer protection and competitiveness.

This year, it seems certain that an overhaul of the nation's health care will finally make it to the top of the committee's agenda, as the chairman said he had always hoped.

Dingell notes that he keeps a black-and-white photo of his father behind the desk in his congressional office.

"Would I like to see Pop have his dreams come to reality? Yeah, I would," he says. "But I think the country really needs this. We've got a health-care system that nobody likes, costs too much, takes care of too few people, does everything wrong and badly."

"I think that's probably a greater reason by far than doing what Dad would like," he adds. "But I've got to tell you that he would say the same thing if he were sitting here."