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John Dingell's health-care moment

By David S. Broder
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No one waited longer for the [passage of health-care reform](#) than John Dingell, so it was only right that no one smiled more broadly than the 83-year-old congressman while seated at the president's side for the [bill-signing ceremony in the White House's East Room](#).

It was 1955 when Dingell succeeded his late father in a special election from Downriver Detroit and took up the family business of working for health care to be guaranteed for every family regardless of income.

"I've been keeping after it for 55 years," the dean of the House told me when I reached him by phone at his Capitol Hill office late Tuesday afternoon. After watching the celebration on TV, I felt I had to talk to [Dingell](#) to make the day complete.

My mind flashed back -- not 55 years, but 16 -- when another president, Bill Clinton, backed by another Democratic Congress, set out to pass a bill that would cover the medically uninsured in this prosperous nation. Dingell was chairman of one of the key House committees handling that bill, Energy and Commerce, and for all his formidable reputation as a masterful legislator, it damn near killed him that he couldn't cajole his committee into sending the measure to the House floor.

The Democratic side of the committee was divided in its approach to the bill, and by the time Dingell snatched it from the subcommittee wrestling with it, the tide of opinion had turned against the Democrats. That November, they lost control of Congress and Dingell lost his chairmanship.

"This time," Dingell said, "we had tremendous support, not just the unions and the AARP but the AMA and the nurses. The Republicans overplayed their hands, and it all came together. The system and the institution worked."

Obama, whose steadfastness was tested and proved worthy in this battle even more than in his climb to the presidency, saluted Dingell and all those from Teddy Roosevelt to [Ted Kennedy](#) who had struggled for this cause. It showed, he said, that "[our presence here today is remarkable and improbable](#)."

"With all the punditry, all of the lobbying, all of the game-playing that passes for governing in Washington, it's been easy at times to doubt our ability to do such a big thing, such a complicated thing; to wonder if there are limits to what we, as a people, can still achieve," he said.

"But today, we are affirming that essential truth -- a truth every generation is called to rediscover for itself -- that we are not a nation that scales back its aspirations. We are not a nation that falls prey to doubt or mistrust. We don't fall prey to fear. We are not a nation that does what's easy. That's not who we are. That's not how we got here.

"We are a nation that faces its challenges and accepts its responsibilities. We are a nation that does what is hard. What is necessary. What is right."

In coming weeks and months, we will all have occasion to be reminded that we are hardly pioneering. We are belatedly catching up to what every other advanced industrial society has long guaranteed its people. Dingell reminded me that when Medicare was passed in 1965, he thought insurance would quickly follow for the rest of the population.

Next year, if not before, Congress will surely have to amend the new law to deal with some of the flaws its critics have noted. In fact, lawmakers will be dealing with health care every time they meet for the foreseeable future.

Inevitably, the cost of the guarantees embodied in this bill will confront a future Congress with hard choices these legislators finessed.

And yet, as John Dingell can testify better than anyone, it is worth celebrating, as Obama did, the achievement of a nation that did what is hard, and necessary, and right.

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