

## Man of Capitol

### Rep. Dingell Wields Wide Power to Probe Much of U.S. Industry

Michigan Democrat Pressures  
Witnesses, Forces Action  
—And Helps Auto Makers

### Questioning Drexel Bonuses

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WASHINGTON—Most members of Congress tax, spend and borrow. John Dingell muscled, questions and regulates.

As the chairman of the Energy and Commerce Committee, Mr. Dingell can be both advocate and arbiter in disputes between the Baby Bells and American Telephone & Telegraph, hospitals and insurers, stockbrokers and banks. Because of its historic role in creating agencies such as the Securities and Exchange Commission, the panel that he heads reaches into executive-branch decision-making in a fashion matched by few others.

That authority, bolstered by the fact that Mr. Dingell also personally leads the committee's Investigations and Oversight panel, gives him a hunting license to probe much of corporate America—oil, rails, securities, communications, science—and he is the legislative switchman on the freightlines of commerce.

"Talk to me," invites the burly Michigan Democrat, but before the words are out, his arm settles on his target's shoulder with the weight of a 4x4 post—pressure treated. "We have a very good friendship," says Rep. Edward Madigan, an Illinois Republican and senior member of Energy and Commerce. "I think I'm high on his list—after General Motors, Ford, Chrysler and Detroit Edison."

Behind his restless, bullying energy, the 63-year-old Mr. Dingell is a study in power—and a study in Congress itself as the institution seeks to regain direction in a new decade. For more than a half century, the Dingell family has held a seat in the House, and few lawmakers are more identified with the entrenched legislative government that endures as presidents come and go.

#### Growing Up in Congress

"Let's go back home," Mr. Dingell tells an aide upon leaving the White House for the Capitol. As a boy, he walked the stone-tiled halls with his father. As a chairman, his love of procedure and iron hand emulate Sam Rayburn, who ran the Commerce Committee early in the New Deal before becoming speaker.

"You have given me no reason to undo what my father and Sam Rayburn did," Mr. Dingell once told an executive seeking to weaken a 1930s public-utility holding-company law.

Like a modern Judge Roy Bean, Mr. Dingell uses his dominating personality to pressure witnesses—and force action—even without any specific legislation.



John Dingell

He snorts at the "whole helluva mess of bonuses" paid before Drexel Burnham Lambert Inc.'s demise—and letters go out to the SEC demanding an accounting. SEC Chairman Richard Breeden said Friday that the SEC is looking into Drexel's payment of \$260 million of bonuses in cash and stock to its employees.)

In full-page newspaper ads, Bolar Pharmaceutical Co. blasted him last fall for creating a "climate of fear" in the generic-drug industry. Months later, the New York company was embarrassed when its outside counsel acknowledged that the company had submitted false documents to the Food and Drug Administration.

#### No Man to Con

"You don't try to con John Dingell," says Sen. Ted Stevens, an Alaska Republican whose own legislative style also tends to the Sam Peckinpah school. "I don't think at the moment he has a peer as chairman of an oversight committee," Speaker Thomas Foley says.

"I am first among equals; I am not the boss," Mr. Dingell says with a laugh, explaining himself to Polish Solidarity leaders here to learn about committee procedure. His voice quavers as he—the great-grandson of a Polish immigrant—becomes a teacher for the new parliament. "They are a model of strength and endurance and courage and dedication," he says later. "I'd rather see a lot more of that kind of thing around me."

Mr. Dingell longs for a more activist federal government even as he senses that his own democratic institution—Congress—may be faltering. In the past year, scandal has swept away old leadership allies, and he himself has come to symbolize the parochialism that often characterizes Congress and his party.

Mr. Dingell's alliance with the auto industry—and reluctant pursuit of a new clean-air law—strains the patience of liberal friends. He provoked a bitter fight by insisting on acting on a business-backed product-liability bill before the 1988 elections. His aggressive investigative style brought embarrassment last year when an aide—since dismissed—was found to have authorized secret tapings of phone conversations in a securities-industry probe.

"I am not big power; I hold big power," Mr. Dingell says. But power draws him into a Washington establishment far removed from his political heritage. Before becoming a congressman, Mr. Dingell's father was a jack-of-all-trades, pipeline supervisor, beef dealer and news printer—the consummate little guy who overcame poor health to fight for medical care for others. Describing the capital's lobbyists in 1936, he said, "There are altogether too many cheap lawyers here whose practice is about on a par with petit larceny, who would starve to death anywhere but in Washington."

Today, Mr. Dingell hunts with and befriends the same lobbying corps. Although organized labor remains his largest single source of political funds, corporate political-action committees gave the lion's share of more than \$1 million received by the chairman's organization over the past three election campaigns. The issues that Energy and Commerce deals with tend less to pit unions against business than to pit industry against industry—making the committee the leading magnet for special-interest money in the House.

PACs have contributed an estimated \$25 million or more to current committee members in the past three election campaigns, and special-interest money has become a form of patronage within the panel.

In the last Congress, for example, Mr. Dingell overrode caucus rules and pushed through a change in how members are assigned to subcommittees. That single stroke cut the power of rival subcommittee chairmen and helped his younger allies win lucrative assignments to panels with jurisdiction over cash-rich industries able to give large amounts.

### His Many Roles

In the bloody fight over his product-liability measure—a crucial issue to Michigan powers Ford Motor and Upjohn—Mr. Dingell was unsparing in his anger over opposition from trial lawyers. In other cases, as in a fight between television networks and producers over whether the networks can share in program-syndication rights, Mr. Dingell can seem to dance with both sides. At one point, he supported the networks on a critical procedural motion, then gave the producers a bill barring the Federal Communications Commission from acting in favor of the networks.

Mr. Dingell's aggressive expansion of his jurisdiction is near-legendary, but the reaction of his fellow chairmen is more complex than it first appears. Former House Banking Committee Chairman Ferdinand St Germain once yielded jurisdiction to Mr. Dingell, knowing that Energy and Commerce would slow down a bill Mr. St Germain feared was moving too fast in his own panel. Similarly, Mr. Dingell, in a celebrated jurisdictional battle with the House Public Works Committee in 1987, had strong support among his fellow chairmen but lost largely because of GOP opposition to his increased power.

"Power is a tool . . . like a hammer or a saw or a wrench," Mr. Dingell says. Standing 6 foot 3 inches, this blacksmith's grandson prefers the hammer. He pounds witnesses with rapid-fire questions, often accompanied by abrasive commentary that puts his target at a disadvantage. "One of the things I have found with rascals is they generally tend to try to retreat into a state of blissful ignorance," said Mr. Dingell in an aside aimed at Safeway executive Walter Schoendorf in a 1987 hearing. "He just dominates," says Mr. Schoendorf, laughing about the experience today. "There's not much give-and-take."

### Rooted in New Deal

Others find it harder to laugh, and after 35 years in Congress, Mr. Dingell can seem less a lawmaker than a law unto himself. His roots remain in New Deal liberalism, but he mostly divides his world between friends and enemies. Scientists complain that his aggressive investigations of alleged research fraud cast a chilling effect over future inquiry.

Environmentalists are baffled at what they see as changes in a man once perceived at the forefront of their movement. With few exceptions, Mr. Dingell says, environmental leaders are "fishy friends: They tend to be very, very ungrateful." Reviewing Mr. Dingell's environmental voting score, the Audubon Society's Brock Evans calculates "50 out of 100. That's not bad if he was from Alabama."

As a chairman today, Mr. Dingell speaks of respect for authority, but in the past he himself has been quick to challenge the leadership. In 1985, he almost single-handedly frustrated an effort by now-Speaker Foley to better organize House rules. He regularly harassed the first Commerce Committee chairman he served under, Oren Harris of Arkansas, and helped weaken the last one, West Virginia's Harley Staggers, before gaining the job himself. In frustration, former House Speaker Thomas O'Neill once considered sending a bill to Mr. Dingell's committee for only 36 hours.

But beneath this hard-boiled image is a complex, even romantic man. When Mr. Dingell's first marriage collapsed in the 1970s, he raised the four children—one as young as two—himself. When beleaguered then-Speaker James Wright broke into tears at a heated news conference last year, Mr. Dingell gave his friend time to regain his composure before the TV cameras by setting off a round of applause.

Mr. Dingell was slow to embrace the Equal Rights Amendment for women but, in 1964, risked his career by actively supporting in floor debate the Civil Rights Act during a tough Democratic primary. In recent years, when a black staffer ran for the Harvard board of overseers on an anti-apartheid divestment platform, Mr. Dingell made telephone calls—without notice—on her behalf.

### Strong Desire to Win

What is most consistent is Mr. Dingell's desire to win and dominate. He has no use for what he sees as the unelected elites who intrude on his party—and his turf. "I used to say I support the platform. I haven't said that for years," he says. He denounces Ralph Nader as an "unmitigated scoundrel." (The consumer activist has said worse about Mr. Dingell.)

In fact, Mr. Dingell's oversight subcommittee amounts to his own Dingell's Raiders, and, despite his scorn for many environmentalists, he is a naturalist who has sketched wildlife and spells accurately the Latin name—*oreamnos*—of the mountain sheep in a painting on his wall.

Above all, Mr. Dingell is a government man. For him, regulation has enduring value, and the sweep of Energy and Commerce's jurisdiction—from steel leghold animal traps to heart valves to golden parachutes—suits his purposes. Asked to name two failures of Congress, he cites Vietnam and the swine flu liability debacle of the late 1970s.

To get the answers he needs, Mr. Dingell brings the government to bear. Energy and Commerce's annual budget of more than \$5.1 million for investigations and studies surpasses any in the House. Recent records of the General Accounting Office, Congress's investigative arm, show that it commits more personnel and spends more travel money in support of Mr. Dingell's panel than it does for the Armed Services and Ways and Means Committees combined.

"It would be fair to say I love Congress," says Mr. Dingell, and, as with the Capitol itself, there is about him a sense of constancy amid the changing seasons and sessions of lawmaking. In 1964, during the civil-rights fight, he remembers early press reports saying he would lose his primary. Today, a young woman who worked in his Washington office then and was the niece of his campaign manager is the wife of Speaker Foley. A seven-year-old son, Christopher Dingell, is now a tall Michigan state senator and potential successor, but the father isn't yet ready to yield.

"I am not drunk on power, I am not getting rich in this goddamn place. I can assure you of that," John Dingell says. "I do view this as a place where I serve."