

Washington at Work

Michigan Democrat Presides As Capital's Grand Inquisitor

By DAVID E. ROSENBAUM
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WASHINGTON, Sept. 29 — This year alone, Representative John D. Dingell's investigations helped force the resignation of the president of Stanford University and led a Nobel Prize-winning scientist to retract a research paper. The Congressman also uncovered mismanagement at the Food and Drug Administration and overbilling at Humana hospitals.

And that was just this year. Over the last decade, his hearings have led to criminal convictions of top Government officials and the resignation of many others and have exposed fraud and corruption in corporate boardrooms and Government agencies.

Critics say Mr. Dingell is more interested in burnishing his reputation as the most fearsome inquisitor on Capitol Hill by bringing powerful people to their knees than he is in getting laws enacted.

For or Against Him

But he maintained in an interview last week that if prominent people were humiliated when they were caught with their hands in the cookie jar, it was not his fault. "We are always very careful," he said. "One of my great fears is that someone is going to say, 'Dingell, you're just another damn McCarthy.' I don't believe anyone has ever made that case."

Few people in official Washington are ambivalent about John Dingell, a 65-year-old Democrat from outside Detroit. Some, generally off the record, call him a mean-spirited, vindictive, power-hungry bully. Others say he is warm, generous and loyal as a person and a tireless and effective force for good government.

Perhaps those widely different views exist because Mr. Dingell himself often seems to view life through a binary lens. His colleagues and the others he deals with are friends or foes, honest or crooked, able or incompetent. Legislation is good or bad; positions are right or wrong.

Mr. Dingell acknowledges that he takes special pleasure in exposing wrongdoing and bringing down to size people who seem to him to act too big for their britches. But, he says, "They've been able to create some great wrongs before they ever got around to us."

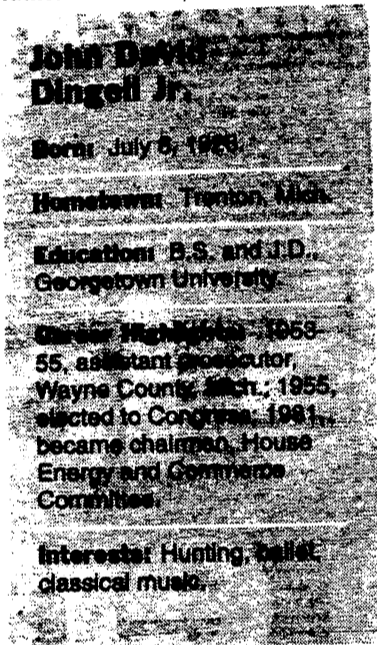
Toilet Seats and Banking

His inquiries led to the criminal conviction of, among others, Michael K. Deaver, one of President Ronald Reagan's top advisers. They have caught prominent figures like Adm. Hyman G. Rickover, the father of the nuclear Navy, in questionable deals. Among those forced from office was Anne Gorsuch Burford, the first head of the Environmental Protection Agency in the Reagan Administration.

Dingell investigations exposed rampant waste and fraud in Pentagon contracts, like the Air Force's \$640 toilet seat and the kennel fees the military paid for the dog of a General Dynamics executive. They showed the generic drug industry to be riven with corruption and the Environmental Protection Agency in the early 1980's to be a tool of the industries it was regulating. Blood banks, bottled water and pacemakers are unquestionably safer now than they used to be because of Dingell exposés.

Beyond the investigations, he has almost unparalleled influence on legislation. Just last week, for example, Representative Dingell, who is chairman of the Energy and Commerce Committee and its Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations, was instrumental in shaping the most important banking legislation in more than 50 years.

Congress has been his life. His father, John David Dingell Sr., was a New Deal Congressman, a strong proponent of Social Security and banking regulations, and John Jr. grew up in Washington. He was a Congressional page as a teen-ager, received his undergraduate and law degrees a few miles from the Capitol at Georgetown University and, after a brief stint as a county prosecutor in Detroit, he was elected to Congress in 1955 to fill the seat left open after his father died.



Dingell champions Detroit and hunts fraud all over.

Few people in public life are so enigmatic. Outside his work, his passions are firearms and hunting on one hand, ballet and classical music on the other. Well over six feet tall and 200 pounds with enormous hands and a booming voice, he dominates every room he enters.

By his own account, Mr. Dingell is the automobile industry's chief spokesman in Congress. He has devoted himself to blocking automobile safety and fuel economy requirements and antipollution legislation.

"I am totally unapologetic about that," he said. "I represent half a million people whose lives are controlled by the good fortune or bad fortune of the auto industry. I was sent down here to look after the welfare of that district and the people I serve."

Otherwise, his politics fit no discernable pattern. His strong support for civil rights laws and vigorous opposition to gun control might not be expected from the representative of a district that is working class, industrial, almost entirely white and heavily Polish. (His grandfather changed the family name from Dzialewicz, and Mr. Dingell repeatedly alludes to his Polish ancestry.)

Half the House's Bills

Since he became chairman 10 years ago, Mr. Dingell has brought more and more fields under the umbrella of the Energy and Commerce Committee. He has jurisdiction now over not only energy and transportation but also the environment, health, telecommunications, insurance, the financial markets, consumer protection, broadcasting, food and drugs, biotechnology and countless other issues that are woven into the fabric of American life in the 1990's.

The committee handles nearly half the bills before the House each year.

Because of the breadth of his authority, some critics blame Mr. Dingell for the failure of Congress to address some of the main issues facing the nation. Indeed, the country has no national energy strategy. Nearly a decade after the break-up of the Bell system, no comprehensive telecommunications law has been passed. The committee has not faced up to soaring medical costs. The rules governing the financial markets are anachronistic. A clean air bill was enacted last year, but only after Mr. Dingell had bottled it up for 10 years.

Mr. Dingell thinks such criticism is unfair. Rather than scoring legislative goals, he says, he has been forced to play goalie and block Republican efforts to cut programs and dismantle Government regulations.

"For the last 10 years," he said, "we have had Administrations, Reagan and Bush both, that did not want legislation. Reagan did everything he did to repeal the Government. So a lot of my efforts have been defensive and not affirmative."

Toppling Titans

And it is as an investigator that Mr. Dingell has truly made his mark.

To critics who say he is unnecessarily personal and brutal in his questioning, Mr. Dingell says his main goal is not to humble people but to ferret out abuses. "Those who are doing things wrong enough to attract the attention of the committee are usually fairly important, prominent, well-to-do people," Mr. Dingell said.

Thus, this year he relentlessly pursued David Baltimore, who won the Nobel Prize for his research in molecular biology and is now president of Rockefeller University, until Dr. Baltimore finally had to concede that research might have been faked in a paper he co-wrote. And Mr. Dingell was not satisfied merely with exposing the way the nation's most famous universities overcharged the Government for research. He kept after the issue until Donald Kennedy announced he would resign as president of Stanford.

Dingell investigations have become such a fundamental part of the Washington scene that seminars are held to advise potential witnesses how to respond, and several lawyers here have built their practices around representing clients before his inquiries.

One of those lawyers said he thought Mr. Dingell sometimes abused his authority by "forcing people to sit there before the television cameras while they are savagely attacked."

Inhibiting Science

Many scientists are also highly critical of Mr. Dingell's style. Maxine F. Singer, director of the Carnegie Institution of Washington, a leading funder of scientific research, said Mr. Dingell's persistent attacks could discourage scientists from taking risks.

"If there is misconduct," Dr. Singer said, "it ought to be dealt with. But it's not much of a bargain to destroy individuals and discourage young people from taking leadership positions in science."

Mr. Dingell says: "We have never done anything to threaten an honest researcher. We have just asked was the work done or was the work not done, was the work falsified or not. Is that going to inhibit an honest person from going into science? I think not."

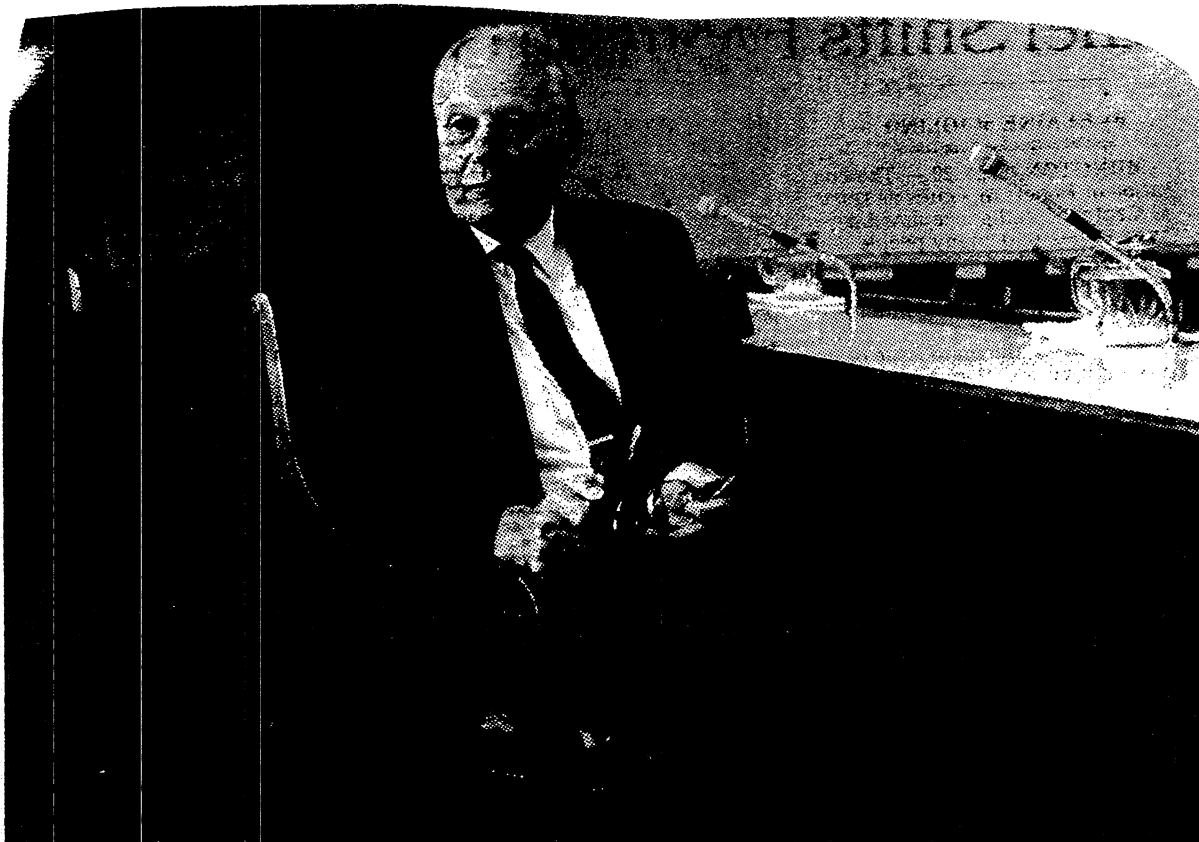
Witnesses who cross Mr. Dingell are not the only ones who have felt his wrath. So have colleagues who he feels have not dealt with him squarely. He has, for instance, prevented Representative James H. Scheuer of Queens, the second-ranking Democrat on the Commerce Committee, from becoming a subcommittee chairman because of an incident in the 1970's when, Mr. Dingell insists, Mr. Scheuer betrayed him by secretly seeking to scuttle legislation he had promised to support.

Daring to Disagree

But Mr. Dingell's friends say he does not hold it against them when they disagree with him so long as they do not blindside him. One protégé, Representative Ron Wyden, Democrat of Oregon, said he told Mr. Dingell when he joined his committee that he could not back the chairman's opposition to the Clean Air Act. "He looked at me and said, 'Just don't hurt me any more than you have to,'" Mr. Wyden recalled.

Out in Michigan, the word is that Mr. Dingell will someday relinquish his Congressional seat so that his son Christopher, a lawyer, engineer and state senator, can have it, keeping the seat in the family for a third generation.

Someday, maybe, Mr. Dingell said, but no time soon. "There's an old Polish saying," he said. "Before you sell the bear's hide, you first have to shoot the bear."



Andrea Mohin for The New York Times

"One of my great fears is that someone is going to say, 'Dingell, you're just another damn McCarthy,'" said Representative John D. Dingell about his reputation as the most fearsome inquisitor on Capitol Hill.