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The Nation; Detroit's bullying angel is set to fight; Longtime Democratic Rep. John Dingell digs in against his party's environmental agenda.

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WASHINGTON

He is an old bull in a new china shop, the longest-serving member of the House working for a new generation of Democratic leaders.

And 81-year-old John D. **Dingell** isn't afraid to break the dishes, even if they crash down on his own party.

As the representative from Michigan's 15th District for more than 50 years, **Dingell** has been Detroit's archangel -- the closest thing the American automobile industry has to divine protection.

He is a master of parliamentary rules and chairman of the House Energy and Commerce Committee.

Dingell has so far stymied the environmental agenda set by House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-San Francisco), a key feature of her agenda to keep the House in Democratic hands.

One of Pelosi's first steps as speaker was the creation of a special committee on climate change, a move many saw as an end-run around the venerable **Dingell**. He insisted the new committee have no legislative power, and when Pelosi agreed, he tartly dismissed it as "about as useful as side pockets on a cow."

Pelosi also pledged the House would pass a bold "energy independence" bill by the Fourth of July to reduce U.S. dependence on foreign oil and to lower carbon dioxide emissions. But that didn't happen. Instead, the House passed an energy bill last week without any new vehicle fuel-efficiency standards, a victory for **Dingell** that delays consideration until the House takes up a global warming bill in the fall, when he cheerfully predicts "a good, bare-knuckle fight."

If this were a tennis match, the score would be advantage **Dingell**.

"I've had to tell the speaker that there's a certain speed to legislation," **Dingell** said with a smile. "You don't get a baby in 4 1/2 months by getting two girls pregnant."

To those who have watched this showdown unfold during the last six months, the drama is classic **Dingell**.

With 14 years as chairman under his belt, **Dingell** is something of a legendary figure on Capitol Hill.

Lobbyists and staffers swap **Dingell** stories like treasured baseball cards.

The stories tend to illustrate the chairman's ability to prevail because he knows how the system works and has the stomach to use it.

"The rules are my sword and my shield," **Dingell** acknowledged in an interview with *The Times* in his office, the walls festooned with hunting trophies that seem to serve as a metaphor for his political victories.

W.J. "Billy" Tauzin, a former Louisiana congressman, likes to tell about an incident in the 1980s when he and other conservative Democrats on the energy committee marshaled the votes to deregulate the price of natural gas. After the committee convened, Tauzin asked to introduce his amendment. **Dingell** said he opposed it.

You may be opposed to it, Tauzin said, but I have the votes.

You may have the votes, said **Dingell**, but I have the gavel.

With that, **Dingell** recessed the committee and didn't reconvene it for months -- until he had swayed enough Republicans to defeat the idea.

"It was vintage, original John **Dingell**," recalled Rep. Joe L. Barton of Texas, now the ranking Republican on the committee. "It showed that, if you're committee chairman, you don't have to have the votes to win - just the moral fortitude to stare people down."

Dingell was first elected in 1955 at 29, to succeed his recently deceased father, John David **Dingell** Sr., the first congressman to represent this district carved from Detroit's auto boom.

Dingell is Polish in background -- his grandfather changed the family name from Dzieglewicz -- and thinks it's part of what makes him a tough opponent.

His expertise as a congressional tactician comes from a knowledge honed in his half-century of service in the House of Representatives and, even before that, his deep ties to the Capitol. He was a House page from 1938 to 1943 while attending Georgetown Prep, and an elevator operator while at Georgetown University's law school.

"He has a tremendous respect for the House as an institution," said Rep. Fred Upton, a Republican from a neighboring Michigan district.

No one has suffered -- or excelled -- more from **Dingell**'s mastery of the rules than a fellow Democrat, Rep. Henry A. Waxman, who came to Congress in 1975 from a district that now includes Beverly Hills and Malibu. Waxman arrived with a good-government mission to clean up the smog obscuring Southern California's beauty. The two battled mightily -- the short, bell-shaped Waxman like a frustrated pugilist swinging at Big John.

Waxman tried to move on air pollution in 1983, but **Dingell** blocked him. He tried again in 1984. Same thing. And again in 1985, 1986, 1987, 1988. Finally in 1989, Waxman won a subcommittee victory on controlling emissions from tailpipes. That broke the logjam. In 1990, Congress finally passed a Clean Air Act with teeth.

"Once we had the votes," recalled Waxman, who now chairs the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee, **Dingell** "decided to negotiate."

When Democrats swept back to power after the November election, with Pelosi's marching orders to move quickly and forcefully on global warming, Waxman reports that **Dingell** told him he, too, wanted a strong bill.

"I'm going to give him the benefit of the doubt," Waxman said recently. "I'm always anxious to work with people with whom I have disagreements."

Smart, wry, colloquial, **Dingell** defies easy stereotyping -- liberal in his early and consistent votes against the war in Iraq, conservative in his hunter's opposition to gun control.

His views on the environment are also hard to pigeonhole.

A member of the Nature Conservancy, **Dingell** prides himself on his conservation initiatives, such as his efforts to protect the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge from drilling and to draft the Endangered Species Act.

"I'm the guy who led the fight," he said.

Dingell has been known to take on business interests. Early in his career, he noticed the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission was not requiring power companies to replenish fish chewed up by hydroelectric plants. He waited for the companies' federal licenses for dams to come up for renewal -- "about 30 years," he quipped -- and put out the word he might oppose them.

"They came to me and said, 'We can't get our licenses,' " **Dingell** recalled. "And I said, 'Oh, gentlemen, you have come to the right place. I will help you, but you're going to buy lots and lots of fish.' "

Dingell may be facing his toughest challenge yet in defending Detroit against calls for higher-mileage vehicles.

High gas prices and widespread worries about climate change have undercut the automakers -- and **Dingell**. Anticipating an epic showdown over global warming legislation, the liberal grass-roots group MoveOn.org recently ran attack ads against the congressman in his district, belittling him as a "Dingellsaurus."

Detroit, with recent mass layoffs and fierce competition from abroad, no longer has the sheer muscle it once did.

Neither does **Dingell**.

Once, his physicality -- he is more than 6 feet tall, with piercing eyes and a booming voice -- reinforced his reputation as a bully and his nickname, "Big John." At hearings, **Dingell** was known to lean menacingly toward witnesses, pounding on a point, commanding with his presence.

"I am ruthless on witnesses," he acknowledged. "Congress has to know what's going on."

He is thinner now, his hearing is no longer acute, and his pace is slowed by a second hip replacement.

His mind, though, is still intimidating opponents.

"He doesn't talk about the good old days. His mind is not geared to shooting bull with Sam Rayburn or Tip O'Neill," said Barton, citing two former speakers. "He's about what's next."

Dingell seems unfazed by the ferocity of the head wind whipping through Congress over climate change legislation. Recalling a notorious fight in which he resisted the pull of public opinion, he said, "I told Ralph Nader that seat belts weren't ready, that they would kill people. And they did."

But **Dingell** also says he understands that the political climate no longer allows him to ram through Detroit's gas-guzzling agenda. He warned automakers to embrace some emissions standards, and they have done that.

"Frankly, the time has come for Congress to look at the problem of global warming," he acknowledged.

Dingell intends to try to make sure that the bill balances its commitment to a cleaner environment against the cost in jobs.

"We're going to get a strong bill," he predicted, but he said he would also look out for the automakers.

"I'll try to see to it it's one they can live with. History will have to tell."

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