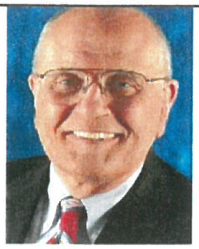
(An excerpt)
Statement of the Federation of Polish Americans (FPA) – February 12, 2019



The Honorable John D. Dingell, Jr. d - February 7, 2019

It is not enough just to offer that 'an era has passed' with the demise of John Dingell, who was also a great friend of Polish Americans. Indeed, *he was Polish American* (The Dingell surname had been Dzieglewicz before it was 'Americanized'). The long-serving Congressman, who was a one-man powerhouse and influence broker in the House of Representatives (and beyond), joined the pantheon of the all-time political greats of the traditional Democratic breed on the American scene relatively early in his career, serving 59 years during 11 Presidential administrations. His biography constitutes, in its fullest context, an encyclopedia of the modern American political era. So complex was his role in Congress that few realize in which events, and to what degree, he influenced the truly momentous episodes of the post-Cold War era. One such example is the grueling political fight in the mid-1990's to trigger expansion of the NATO alliance to include Poland. When Poland was allowed across the divide of post-war Europe in Spring 1999, history changed course.

But the story had started much earlier. The first task of enlargement proponents was to get the President's attention. Later, the fight would be focused in the halls of Congress accomplishing the task. Dingell would play a role in both in Washington. While the Polish American grassroots effort surprised the Washington political scene by early 1994 with calls to reshape European security architecture, it was necessary to *follow through from the inside.* Congressman Dingell stepped in with a personal appeal to Bill Clinton on Poland's behalf

The story is that of a man in his Congressional District, who was politically well acquainted with Dingell, making a direct appeal to him on the Poland-to-NATO question. The gentleman, an attorney from the old *'all-Polish'* 16th District in Dearborn, Michigan, wrote a lengthy letter to Dingell, the influential House Energy and Commerce Chair. Dingell subsequently raised the issue privately with the President during a duck hunting outing in 1994 as a result. The Federation of Polish Americans (FPA) instigated that episode through the Dearborn attorney.

As it unfolded, the initial three-year (1994-1996) fight in Congress would not see real progress until June 1996, when critical co-sponsors were signed-on to an early version of a NATO legislative bill. Chairman Ben Gilman would credit the Polish American grassroots mobilization (and FPA, as a principal organizer of it) as being critical in breaking that 30-month political logjam in Congress upon passage of the NATO Enlargement Facilitation Act.

The in tandem 1996 House-Senate votes established *a decisive 80% margin of support in Congress that remained intact through final Senate Treaty amendment ratification in 1998.*

For Dingell's part, he never ceased to be a behind the scenes advocate of Polish American causes, including Poland's NATO membership. He was the consummate politician who delivered results, but without the sometimes seamy implications of 'machine' politics. Dingell took the high road on issues, understanding intimately not only his immediate constituency but also American society as a whole. That understanding extended to knowing what would be in the best interests of the United States — NATO enlargement being a case in point. He appreciated, like all too few in Congress did in the early 1990s, Poland's historical pain of Soviet subjugation; but more importantly, as an American he grasped the geo-strategic implications of integrating Central/Eastern Europe (with Poland ever as its center of gravity) into modern Europe. Without a concomitant security guarantee all the talk of 'Partnership' would have been so many words, substituting instead a U.S.–Russia dialogue for Poland's future need of a military shield under NATO. And leaving the middle of Europe unguarded as it had been after 1918.

Members of Congress, big and small, knew where Congressman Dingell stood on Polish American issues. They didn't need to ask, at least ultimately, about his position on the well-being of the powerful chairman's patrimony, Poland. Thus, in the 1996 election year, the years-long opposition to NATO enlargement rather suddenly evaporated, setting the stage for President Clinton to do his part by getting the Treaty protocol into the U.S. Senate by mid-1997. While others took the lead in sponsoring early legislation, Dingell never took his eye off the 'Poland-to-NATO ball' and made sure other Members of Congress knew his view.

The recent words of a current prominent Member of Congress suggest an epitaph of sorts for Dingell. She rightly observes that in Dingell's era Committee Chairmen could periodically exercise greater power than the Speaker of the House! What was more, the way things were accomplished was to eschew ideological positions and work through the rules of the House toward bi-partisan compromise. Dingell understood this process well, as did the leadership of both parties. Her words also read like the FPA/Polish American playbook preamble used to win the fight in Congress almost TWO YEARS before the final Senate decision on the nuclear security guarantee to Poland. Some 14 weeks before the 1996 General Election both the House and Senate delivered in bi-partisan fashion their message to the President: Poland should be offered U.S.-lead security guarantees.

So yes, there is a passing of an era underway – but, it is due in general to the nature of the overheated political scene itself– and not just about the passing of a brilliant practitioner of the political art like Dingell.