

How Elijah Cummings Became Democrats' Favorite Fighter

"I get frustrated. But someone has to do this job," Cummings said. posted on April 7, 2014, at 10:43 p.m.

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Rep Darrell Issa (right) cuts off the mic of Rep. Elijah Cummings (left) during a meeting of the House Oversight Committee. Chip Somodevilla / Getty Images

WASHINGTON — In the last month, House Democrats have twice tried to force a vote condemning the behavior of Oversight Chairman Darrell Issa.

The day after Issa cut off Rep. Elijah Cummings' microphone, Cummings watched quietly, face expressionless, as Rep. Marcia Fudge read the resolution while House Democrats stood around her.

It was only the latest episode in the enduring, turbulent feud between the two leaders atop the House Oversight Committee. Benghazi, Fast and Furious, the IRS, Obamacare — oversight's battles have been ongoing.

The basic charges remain the same: Issa says Cummings is an obstructionist who defends the White House at all costs. Issa's chairmanship and investigations have infuriated Democrats since practically the moment he took the gavel. They decry Issa's investigations as hyper-partisan, and his tendency to overreach has [even rankled](#) fellow Republicans.

But along the way, the volatile committee has made Cummings into one of the most important ranking members for the minority.

The deeply intense Cummings says he took on the role of Issa antagonist somewhat begrudgingly. To hear Cummings tell it, the spotlight he now finds himself in was never something he purposefully sought.

"I didn't ask for this, they asked me," he said in a sit-down interview with BuzzFeed. "I saw it as an opportunity to make sure that fairness was brought to the process and that we held government to a higher standard."

Indeed, in 2010, both the White House and the Democratic leadership encouraged Cummings run for the ranking member slot — over former Rep. Ed Towns who had seniority on the committee.

"I told Issa if he really listened to me and if he really was about what he said when he reads that preamble every time, we're probably on the same page on most things," Cummings said. "For me, government working right is very important."

It was around then that the battles between Issa and Cummings started. When announcing that he'd run for the spot, Cummings [said in a statement](#) that Democrats would "take every opportunity to defend against partisan attacks and the dismantling of policies that ensure security for hardworking Americans," a statement Issa and his staff repeatedly point to as evidence that Cummings had only ever intended to be an obstructionist on the committee.

"He has no genuine interest in working, on a bipartisan basis, to expose the full truth," [Issa said](#) last June after Cummings said that the investigation into the IRS targeting of conservative groups was "solved." (Cummings later clarified his remarks, [telling Politico](#) it was the "witch hunt" that needed to end.)

But it's the ability to counter Issa at every turn that has elevated Cummings' stature among his Democratic colleagues on Capitol Hill. The oversight committee hasn't been able to produce a whole lot in the way of oversight or reform, and they blame each other for that. But to Democrats, Cummings is doing exactly what he is supposed to be doing.

"It was quite clear he had the skill set and the intestinal fortitude to go the battlements when necessary. I don't think anyone had any illusions about what it was going to be like," said oversight member Rep. Gerry Connolly of Democrats urging Cummings to run. "I think it's worse than people thought but there were no illusions about what we were facing."

"Congressman Cummings is a respected leader who is admired for his courage, commitment to the truth, and his compassion for all Americans," Democratic Leader Nancy Pelosi said in a statement to BuzzFeed. "Every day, he works to ensure that government always works for the American people, and that dedication has made him an invaluable asset to our nation. House Democrats are proud of the work Elijah has done as Ranking Member, and as a native Baltimorean, I take special pride in his success."

This week, the committee will move forward with a vote to hold former IRS official Lois Lerner in contempt for refusing to answer questions and repeatedly pleading the fifth. Issa proclaimed she had waived her Fifth Amendment rights by providing an opening statement at a hearing a few months ago. But Lerner and the IRS investigation became somewhat of a background story to the feud between Issa and Cummings when the mic-cutting incident dominated headlines that week.

That's par for the course on a normal week when press releases and accusations fly between the two sides, and it's not hard to see the deep distrust the two have for each other.

Before each hearing, Cummings said he prays. "I ask God to guard my tongue, my heart and my mind. I just believe in that."

"It allows me to go a place that's very, very serene," Cummings said.

But when Issa abruptly adjourned a hearing with Lerner without allowing Democrats to make statements or ask questions arguing the hearing was simply a continuation of one that had been put on pause — Cummings' serenity was put to the test. After a bit of back and forth, Issa cut off the mics and signaled his staff to do so by drawing his hand across his neck.

And that's when Cummings was no longer serene.

"If you will sit down and allow me to ask a question — I am a member of the Congress of the United States of America," Cummings told him, nearly yelling. "I am tired of this."

"We have members over here," Cummings said, gesturing at Democrats. "Each of whom represents 700,000 people. You cannot just have a one-sided investigation. There is absolutely something wrong with that. It is absolutely un-American."

Issa apologized to Cummings but did say on [Fox News](#) that the ranking member had thrown a "hissy fit" and Issa felt he'd followed the rules of the House.

For his part on the episode, Cummings was philosophical. "As you get older you come to a point where you face your own mortality and you begin to look at time as very precious," Cummings said. "And that's how I view my time when I sit in a four-hour hearing or 20-minute hearing where I'm not allowed to speak."

Democrats seized the issue, producing the resolutions for the floor votes to condemn Issa.

"In a lot of ways, that incident elevated Elijah's stature and I think it significantly diminished the chairman's," Connolly said. "I can't tell you how often out and about, with family, friends, even strangers talk about that."

It's not all bitterness on the Oversight Committee: Both Cummings and a spokesman for the committee pointed to handful of issues where the chairman and ranking member have worked together. But even those statements were couched.

"Although Ranking Member Cummings has never lived up to his rhetoric of supporting fact-based oversight," spokesman Frederick Hill said in a statement to BuzzFeed. "Chairman Issa has appreciated his willingness to put those differences aside and work towards committee consensus on key common sense legislative initiatives including spending data transparency, contracting reform, and strengthening whistleblower protections."

Cummings also pointed to many of those same instances where he and Issa have been able to work together. He said he hoped there would be areas where they'd be able to work together again — and that his frustrations with the committee were just that.

"When I look at the energy and time we spend in hearings and to think of what comes out, is not very much... But I don't get angry," Cummings said. "I get frustrated. But someone has to do this job... We do not know how long we will be there, but we are called to be in that moment in that job. I believe this is a moment, for whatever reason, for me to be right here."

"Is it frustrating? Sure. But what isn't frustrating?"