

Democrats' Benghazi warrior



Democrats' hopes of rendering the panel ineffective rest largely on Cummings' shoulders. | Getty

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He's the man who helped bring you Sandra Fluke.

Rep. Elijah Cummings is the Democrats' top guy on the new Benghazi select committee, but fighting Republican-driven scandals is old hat to the pugnacious Maryland lawmaker.

Cummings understands the twists and turns of the Benghazi controversy just as well as many Republicans. For three years, he has served as Rep. Darrell Issa's chief sparring partner on the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee, one of the panels where the scandal first caught fire.

The former prosecutor, who speaks in a booming baritone and is from a safe Baltimore-based seat, has earned a reputation among Democrats for besting Issa on a number of Obama administration controversies ranging from Benghazi, to the Internal Revenue Service targeting of conservative groups, to *Fast and Furious*.

Cummings' work has made him a champion to the left — where he's called in noted witnesses like Fluke to testify — and a respected foe to some on the right. So while Democrats have called Benghazi nothing more than a political game, by picking Cummings, they're showing they still plan to play.

“Elijah has done a great job at very fundamentally changing the narrative,” said Rep. Gerry Connolly (D-Va.), a member of the Oversight panel who has watched Cummings at work. “Darrell was given the charge of leading in the trenches, of taking on this president — and I think Elijah, working with Democrats, has managed to change that narrative, in many cases to be about Issa.”

The House GOP took the unexpected step recently of voting to create a special committee to further probe the controversial events in Benghazi. Democrats’ hopes of rendering the panel ineffective rest largely on Cummings’ shoulders.

Democrats long debated whether to appoint their own members to the panel and thus justify its existence. But Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) ultimately decided it would be better to have access to the panel’s documents and witnesses. Given that line of thinking, it only made sense to appoint a tested Democrat as the ranking member.

A source close to the decision said there was “never any question in [Pelosi’s] mind” that if Democrats were going to serve on the committee, Cummings would be her ranking member.

On Oversight, the Marylander has served as Democrats’ foil to the fiery, headline grabbing Issa. Democrats widely credit Cummings as being instrumental for scoring political wins against zealous Oversight Republicans.

It was Cummings, for instance, who released an oft-cited report, debunking the GOP claim that the Fast and Furious gun-running scandal was directed by the White House. On the IRS controversy over the agency’s targeting of conservative groups, Cummings released a full transcript of interviews with a self-described Republican and IRS manager who said it was the IRS — not the Obama administration — that flagged tea party groups for extra scrutiny.

It was during a confrontation this year over the IRS that Issa’s and Cummings’ testy relationship came to a head, creating an unfortunate visual for the California Republican when he cut off Cummings’ microphone while pantomiming a throat cut. Cummings was attempting to give a closing statement after Issa gaveled the hearing out. [Issa](#) was later forced to issue a rare apology to the Democrat.

And in 2012, it was the Oversight Democrats, led by Cummings and his committee staff, that sought to invite Fluke — then a Georgetown coed — to testify on proposals to mandate that employers include contraceptives in health care coverage. Issa spiked her appearance and, days later, Rush Limbaugh attacked Fluke’s sexual history, turning her into a banner headline.

These moves have earned Cummings adoration within his conference and the respect of many Republicans — while others dismiss him as a crusader openly ignoring facts in his quest to defend the White House.

Elected in 1996 after surviving a tough seven-way primary, Cummings served for 13 years as a Maryland state legislator where he was the first African-American in that state's history to be named speaker pro tempore.

After Republicans won back the House, GOP leadership tapped Issa to run Oversight — giving him large latitude to aggressively investigate the Obama administration. Cummings was not initially the front-runner for the ranking member spot — New York Rep. Edolphus Towns had served as the panel's chairman for two years and eagerly threw his name into the ring.

But by December, Towns, who retired from Congress in 2013, had dropped out of the race. The White House and Pelosi reportedly encouraged Towns to step aside instead in favor of Cummings, who was seen as a more effective Issa rival.

“He is tenacious but also believes in fairness,” said Rep. Sander Levin (D-Mich.), speaking broadly of Cummings' work as ranking member. “His personality is perfect for this role.”

Levin, ranking member on the House Ways and Means Committee, worked extensively with Cummings on the two panels' IRS investigations.

Democrats have dismissed the House Benghazi committee as a “sham” and a “kangaroo court,” but Pelosi ultimately decided it was better for Democrats to participate and gain access to the testimony and findings than rail against the process from the outside.

But even with Democrats rejecting the panel as unnecessary, Cummings will have a tough job. The left is hoping he can once again use his intensity to serve as a match to the loquacious Gowdy.

“Ranking member Cummings has led the Democrats on the Oversight Committee with great integrity, distinction and principle,” Pelosi said. “He is a fearless leader and a formidable investigator who will ensure the Select Committee does what's right by the families of the victims and focuses Congress on the steps needed to prevent a tragedy like Benghazi from ever happening again.”

Cummings and Rep. Trey Gowdy, also an Oversight member, both insist they have a good, even friendly relationship — despite frequent sparring during hearings on the embattled former IRS official Lois Lerner. The two chatted amicably off the House floor just hours after Pelosi announced Cummings would be the top Democrat and they met again on Thursday to hash out the beginning details on staffing and timing for the committee's work.

“I respect Mr. Cummings and his work in Congress,” said Gowdy, the South Carolina Republican who will serve as the Benghazi panel's chairman.

Last week, Cummings praised Gowdy as “a great prosecutor.”

The five House Democrats serving on the panel will need to keep a delicate balance. After emails released from the White House showed that the Obama administration had a larger role in crafting talking points for then-U.N. Ambassador Susan Rice than previously disclosed, it gave Republicans a reason to launch a new probe into the attacks.

If Democrats are seen as stymieing legitimate work, it could backfire.

But if Republicans on the panel overreach, or focus disproportionately on former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Cummings said he will be ready to speak out.

House Republican leadership is intent on ensuring that the Benghazi committee hews to the facts. Gowdy — who never lost a case during his tenure as a federal prosecutor — is passionate but isn't known for overreaching. He has insisted he'll be fair and not try to score political points.

Cummings said last Wednesday that he planned to serve as a check to Republicans.

"I feel that I owe it to the families of Ambassador [Chris] Stevens and the other brave Americans who lost their lives to bring some minimal level of balance to this process and to check false claims whenever I can," he said.