

The 12 members of what might now be called the not-so-super committee, who were charged with finding ways to reduce the nation's crippling national debt by trillions, knew going in what was at stake. It was nothing less than America's future. And they had a pretty good blueprint in the report of the Simpson-Bowles commission chaired by former Republican Sen. Alan Simpson and former University of North Carolina system president Erskine Bowles.

Unfortunately, Simpson and Bowles and their group produced a little too much truth for the politicians who had to actually get things done.

Entitlements such as Medicare and Social Security, long viewed as political sacred cows, would have been at the least examined for savings and there possibly would have been changes in benefits. The same for defense, and for tax rates. The Simpson-Bowles group recognized that shrinking the debt was going to be a bear, and would require something for which no politician likes to ask: sacrifice on the part of the people, whether that meant higher Social Security taxes or an end to tax loopholes, for example.

But Bowles, a former chief of staff for President Bill Clinton, knew enough about the partisan divide in Washington, more bitter than ever these days, to offer a dire forecast when he appeared before the supercommittee of six Republicans and six Democrats about three weeks ago. "I'm worried," he said, "that you're going to fail."

On the money

His worry proved justified. The supercommittee failed, and now \$1.2 trillion in debt reductions, coming out of both domestic and defense programs, are scheduled automatically to go into effect. The supercommittee could have chosen to come up with compromises, and even more spending cuts to help stabilize the economy, but basically it came down to Republicans stubbornly resisting any tax increases even for the wealthiest Americans, and Democrats protecting Social Security and Medicare.

"It's depressingly simple," said Democratic Rep. David Price of North Carolina's 4th District. "The bottom line is the Republican Party is simply incapable or unwilling to make the kind of

comprehensive deal we know this situation requires. And they simply will not deal with the taxes of the wealthiest people in this country."

He had it right. Republican lawmakers are scared to death of a man relatively few Americans have heard of, the anti-tax lobbyist Grover Norquist, head of Americans for Tax Reform. Norquist has no-tax pledges signed by all six GOP members of the supercommittee and virtually all Republican candidates and members of Congress. Those who break his leash will be punished by well-funded opponents in their primaries.

No bending

Such pledges basically take compromise off the table. To suggestions of new tax revenues, Republicans essentially say, "Take it out of Medicare and Social Security. Take it out of domestic spending. Take it out of the middle class."

It is not an exaggeration to say that a pledge to ideology seems to trump the oath of their offices. Parents tell children every day in this country: If you stand up to a bully, he will back down or you will at least regain your self-respect. Republicans say, bow down to Grover Norquist and do what he says.

The problem is, debt reduction isn't about one vote on one issue. It's about survival as a truly sovereign country. It's about the standard of living available to Americans in years to come. The national debt is now over \$15 trillion. The children of this generation, and the next, and the next will, if the debt continues to build, have a country paralyzed in a vice grip of creditors. America will no longer control its own destiny.

But at least Republicans will be able to say they protected the wealthy until the very end.