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Just who made Grover Norquist the king?

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Who gave Grover Norquist, head of Americans for Tax Reform, authority over what, if any, tax can be raised to bring the country back from the brink of financial disaster?

Ask your member of Congress.



Ask Rep. Cathy McMorris Rodgers, R-Wash.

Ask Sens. Mike Crapo and Jim Risch, both R-Idaho.

Ask Reps. Raul Labrador and Mike Simpson, also both R-Idaho.

They are among 238 House members and 41 senators who at some point in their careers gave Norquist their signature in blood, pledging to "oppose any and all efforts to increase the marginal income tax rate for individuals and businesses; and ... oppose any net reduction or elimination of deductions and credits, unless matched dollar for dollar by further reducing tax rates."

Woe to the GOP politician who violates that pledge. Norquist will unleash an assault from the right, defeating the incumbent in his next primary election battle.

Hence the Taxpayer Protection Pledge has locked the GOP into a fiscally and politically untenable position, insisting the \$1.3 trillion yearly budget deficit will be reduced entirely by program and entitlement cuts.

But no tax increase is entirely black and white.

The Bush tax cuts, for instance, are not carved in stone. They expire at the end of the year. And here's the rub: Making a real dent in the federal deficit requires stopping the Bush-era tax breaks, not just for those families earning a lot of money, but for everybody. Do nothing

and they disappear. Does failure to take an affirmative action - passing a new bill - violate Norquist's pledge?

Don't consult your elected representative in Washington, D.C.

Just ask Norquist. It's up to him.

How about tax entitlements? If rates are going to stay low or go even lower, you must close down goodies for the middle class. For example, the government might stop the mortgage interest deduction. That's an upside-down subsidy because the people who need it least - people in the highest income brackets - get the most. If you really wanted to promote home ownership at the margins and at a lower cost, you'd target a tax credit.

Since when is ending a tax entitlement a tax increase?

Only Norquist knows for sure.

Or how about tax earmarks? Subsidizing domestic oil exploration and production made sense when oil was trading at \$10 a barrel in the 1990s. At \$80 a barrel or more, does the oil industry need Uncle Sam's encouragement?

It's Norquist's call.

That's a lot of power to give to an unelected lobbyist. When is someone going to stand up to him?

Simpson, for instance, was among 38 House members this spring to actually vote for the deficit reduction plan initially backed by former Sen. Alan Simpson, R-Wyo., and former Clinton chief of staff Erskine Bowles.

When he signed Norquist pledge in 1998, Simpson said the country was running surpluses. It was a different era.

"I didn't know I was signing a marriage agreement that would last forever," Simpson has said.

That's 38 out of 435.

Likewise when Crapo signed the Norquist pledge in 1996, Bill Clinton was seeking a second term, welfare reform had been passed and the country was on the verge of a balanced budget. Since then, Crapo has served on the Simpson-Bowles deficit panel and joined up with the Senate's Gang of Six. He at least acknowledges some revenue package will be part of the deal - though he couches it in terms of lowering the rates and broadening the base.

That's six of 100 senators.

Even a few GOP congressional hopefuls are dodging Norquist's pledge, but it's only a trickle - about a third of the GOP's 25 most promising candidates.

But as soon as the anti-tax operative staged his two-day confab with congressional Republicans last week, prominent members fell in line, reports Washington Post columnist Dana Milbank elsewhere on this page.

How dare Simpson, Crapo or others think they should be in charge. They're only elected officials, after all. Only Norquist can tell the GOP what is and what is not an acceptable tax bill.

Bet you thought that was the voters' business, didn't you? - M.T.

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