The Pledge: Grover Norquist's hold on the GOP

As head of Americans for Tax Reform since 1986, Grover Norquist has transformed a single issue - preventing tax hikes - into one of the key platforms of the Republican Party. As Steve Kroft reports, his biggest coup was getting more than 270 members of Congress, and nearly all of the 2012 Republican presidential primary candidates, to sign a pledge promising never to vote to raise taxes. But some opponents say the pledge may be hindering a solution to America's debt crisis.

The following is a script of "The Pledge" which aired on Nov. 20, 2011. Steve Kroft is correspondent, Frank Devine, producer.

The Joint Congressional Committee on Deficit Reduction has just three days to reach a deal eliminating at least $1.2 trillion from the nation's debt using some combination of cutting spending and raising taxes.

The person at the heart of those negotiations - and some would say the person responsible for the deadlock - is neither a member of Congress nor the holder of any public office. He is a lobbyist and a conservative activist named Grover Norquist who, over the years, has gotten virtually every Republican congressman and senator to sign an oath called "The Pledge." It's a promise that they will never, under any circumstances, vote to raise taxes on anyone. And so far Grover Norquist has held them to it, controlling 279 votes, including the speaker of the House, the Senate minority leader and all six Republican members of the Joint Committee on Deficit Reduction.

Steve Kroft: A lot of people think you're the most powerful man in Washington.

Grover Norquist: The tax issue is the most powerful issue in American politics going back to the Tea Party. People say, 'Oh, Grover Norquist has power.' No. Grover Norquist and Americans for Tax Reform focus on the tax issue. The tax issue is a powerful issue.

Grover Norquist is trying to be modest. Since creating Americans for Tax Reform at Ronald Reagan's behest back in 1985, Norquist has been responsible, more than anyone else, for rewriting the dogma of the Republican Party.

Norquist: The Republicans won't raise your taxes. We haven't had a Republican vote for an income tax increase since 1990.

Kroft: And this was your doing?


It began with the simple idea of getting Republicans all over the country to sign an oath called the "Taxpayer Protection Pledge," promising their constituents that they would never, ever vote for anything that would make their taxes go up.
And once they sign the pledge, Grover Norquist never forgets. The more signatures he's collected, the more his influence has grown.

Norquist: I think to win a Republican primary-- It is difficult to imagine somebody winning a primary without taking the pledge.

The signatories not only include more than 270 members of Congress, but all of the Republican presidential candidates, with the lone exception of John Huntsman.

All that leverage has made Norquist's Wednesday breakfast meetings a must-attend event for Republican operatives fortunate enough to get an invitation. David Keene, the president of the National Rifle Association, was there the day we attended along with conservative columnist John Fund.

John Fund: This is the Grand Central station of the conservative movement.

We were told it was the first time cameras have ever been allowed into the weekly off-the-record strategy session.

[Steve Law (American Crossroads): Our approach is going to be to just simply drill away every day.]

Norquist: It's people from Capitol Hill, House and Senate, think tanks, Tea Party groups, business groups. Everybody who wants the government to be smaller and everybody who wants the government to leave them alone.

[Norquist (at Seattle Tea Party event): I intend to win. I intend to be part of the whole effort to crush the other team.]

Grover Norquist has been called both the "dark wizard of the right's anti-tax cult" and "the single most effective conservative activist in the country." He is a libertarian ideologue who believes that Washington is controlling our lives through the taxes it raises to fund big government. And he's said that he wants to shrink it to a size where it could be drowned in a bathtub.

Kroft: You wanna drown it in the bathtub?

Norquist: No. We want it down to the size to where it would fit in a bathtub. And then it could worry about what we were up to.

Kroft: I mean, you did say that your ultimate ambition was to chop it in half and then shrink it again to where we were at the turn of the century. You're talking about 1900 not 2000.

Norquist: Well, the-- I think--

Kroft: Eight percent of GDP.

Norquist: Yeah. We functioned in this country with government at eight percent of GDP for a long time and quite well.
Kroft: That was before Social Security. It was before Medicare. It was before welfare assistance, unemployment assistance. Is that the federal government you envision?

Norquist: Each of these government programs were set up supposedly, in name, to solve a problem. Okay. Do they solve the problem? Could the problem be better solved through individual initiative? I mean, I think we've found under welfare that we are doing more harm than good.

Kroft: Do you feel the government has any obligation to the poor or the elderly or the unemployed?

Norquist: Yeah. It should stop stepping on them, kicking them and making their lives more difficult.

Norquist claims he got the idea to brand the Republican Party as the party that would never raise your taxes, when he was just 12 years old and volunteering for the Nixon campaign. He says it came to him one day while he was riding home on the school bus.

Norquist: If the parties would brand themselves the way Coke and Pepsi and other products do so that you knew what you were buying, it had quality control. I vote for the Republican. He or she will not raise my taxes. I'll buy one. I'll take that one home.

Kroft: So this is about marketing?

Norquist: Yes. It's a part of that. Yeah, very much so.

But Norquist says the success of any product requires relentless monitoring and diligent quality control to protect the brand, whether it's Coca Cola or the Republican Party.

Norquist: 'Cause let's say you take that Coke bottle home, and you get home, and you're two thirds of the way through the Coke bottle. And you look down at what's left in your Coke bottle is a rat head there. You wonder whether you'd buy Coke ever again. You go on TV, and you show 'em the rat head in the Coke bottle. You call your friends, and tell them about it. And Coke's in trouble. Republicans who vote for a tax increase are rat heads in a Coke bottle. They damage the brand for everyone else.

Grover Norquist is not interested in compromise. He likes things ugly and takes no prisoners. Those who refuse to sign the pledge or backslide are subjected to primary fights against well-funded opponents, backed by Norquist.

[Norquist: These are people in North Carolina who voted for a tax increase when they said they wouldn't. And down here in blue are which ones were defeated in the next election.]

Kroft: Well, is there any set of circumstances in which you would condone a tax increase? Or release people from the pledge?

Norquist: The pledge is not to me. It's to the voters. So an elected official who says, 'I think I wanna break my pledge,' he doesn't look at me and say that. He looks at his voters and says that. That's why some of them look at their voters, don't wanna say that, and they go, "Well, how 'bout you? Could you release me from my pledge?" No, no. I can't help you.

Kroft: But you--
Norquist: You didn't promise me anything.

Kroft: But you're the keeper of the pledge.

Norquist: We remind your voters that you took the pledge.

Kroft: You are the ones that are--

Norquist: That's true.

Kroft: --gonna retaliate if they break the pledge.

Norquist: Oh, no, no, no. The voters will retaliate. We may inform the voters. But let's say the voters all want--

Kroft: Inform the voters with hundreds of thousands of dollars in campaign or educational -

Norquist: Nineteen--

Kroft:--expenditures to point out the fact that they broke the pledge.

Norquist: If necessary.

Kroft: But you make it pretty clear. If someone breaks the pledge, you're gonna do everything you can to get rid of them.

Norquist: To educate the voters that they raise taxes. And again, we educate people--

Kroft: To get rid of them.

Norquist: To encourage them to go into another line of work, like shoplifting or bank robbing, where they have to do their own stealing.

Kroft: You've got them by the shorthairs.

Norquist: The voters do. Yeah.

Kroft: And they have to march in lockstep with Grover Norquist?

Norquist: With the taxpayers of their state. I applaud from the sidelines. I go, 'Very good.' Yes, yes.

If nothing else, it is a brilliant, bare-knuckle political strategy with some of the characteristics of a protection racket. Many Republican congressmen fear retaliation from Norquist if they even suggest that a tax increase for the wealthiest of Americans should be up for discussion in the current deficit negotiations. And Democrats - like Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid - have been demonizing Norquist on a daily basis.

Sen. Harry Reid: They're giving speeches that we should compromise on our deficit, but never do they compromise on Grover Norquist. He is their leader.

But he also has some critics among elder statesmen of the Republican Party, the most vocal being Senator Alan Simpson.
Kroft: What do you think of Grover Norquist?

Sen. Alan Simpson: [snorts]

Simpson gleefully accepts that he is one of Norquist's Republican rat heads in the Coke bottle. He got there by serving as co-chairman of the National Commission on Fiscal Responsibility, which recommended that some tax increases would be necessary to solve the nation's debt problem. Simpson has no use for Norquist.

Simpson: He may well be the most powerful man in America today. So if that's what he wants, he's got it. You know, he's -- megalomaniac, ego maniac, whatever you want to call him. If that's his goal, he's damn near there. He ought to run for president because that will be his platform: 'No taxes, under any situation, even if your country goes to hell.'

Simpson also wants to know where Norquist and Americans for Tax Reform, with its multimillion dollar budget gets its money.

Simpson: When you get this powerful, and he is, then it's, 'Where do you get your scratch, Grover?' Is it two people? Is it 10 million people? The American people demand to know where you get your money, Grover babe.

But under federal law, Grover babe, as Simpson calls him, and Americans for Tax Reform, a nonprofit organization, aren't required to disclose the identity of its contributors. So the finances of a group that demands transparency in government are opaque. Norquist says the money comes from direct mail and other grassroots fundraising efforts. But a significant portion appears to come from wealthy individuals, foundations and corporate interests.

Kroft: In the interest of transparency, would you disclose your major donors?

Norquist: I-- I would not-- I don't know. Haven't thought of it. It doesn't really matter because what we do is what we do. I guess I would argue, thinking back on it, we've had times when people who are contributors to us were literally threatened by senators and congressmen.

Kroft: So you're protecting the corporate interests from harassment and threats?

Norquist: Well, protecting me and anyone who wants to participate in American politics. You don't want people threatened because they wanna fight against higher taxes.

Over the years, some of his group's lobbying activities have stretched into areas that are not generally associated with preventing tax hikes. He has lobbied the State Department on behalf of the controversial Keystone pipeline and has dipped into areas like communications law, raising suspicions that the "Leave Us Alone Coalition" includes a lot of wealthy and powerful interests. His reputation also took a hit a few years ago because of his close association with disgraced lobbyist Jack Abramoff. But none of the insinuations of impropriety have ever stuck.

Norquist: It didn't work because at the end of the day, there wasn't a there there.

Sen. Alan Simpson: He is a Houdini. He-- you can throw him in the bottom of the East River in chains and he'd come outta there.
But Alan Simpson predicts that Norquist could soon become irrelevant. He thinks the country's financial situation is so dire that tax increases will become inevitable, and that a lot of Republicans who have signed the no-tax increase pledge, are already experiencing buyer's remorse.

Kroft: You think there are Republicans who have signed it who regret it?

Simpson: I do. I know damn well they have. I've talked to 'em. They come up to us and say, 'Save us from ourselves. I got trapped by this guy.'

In fact there are a few signs it's already beginning to happen - albeit on a small scale.

Thirty-seven Republican pledge signers have urged the select committee to consider all options in solving the debt crisis. And six Republican congressmen, including Steve Latourette of Ohio, have rescinded their pledges altogether. Latourette, who signed his back in 1994, says his driver's license expires, the milk in his refrigerator expires -- the only thing that never expires is the Grover Norquist pledge.

Rep. Steve Latourette: My word has been good on this tax pledge for 18 years. To be bound by something based upon circumstances that existed 18 years ago, when the circumstances are different, I think that's a little naive.

Grover Norquist says he's not losing any sleep over the defections. He's convinced that the Republicans have no intention of raising taxes and he still has signed markers from 279 members of Congress promising they will never let it happen.

Norquist: Most of the Republicans I know are very pleased that we make it easy for them to credibly make that commitment. They're smiling when they're getting their picture taken with me and-- and the pledge. Not grumpy. Smiling.

Kroft: Do you believe that everybody who smiles at a press conference is actually happy?

Norquist: No, but most, many. There may be one or two that are-- are grumpy. And if they wish to provide their names, we'll focus on their states in upcoming elections.

Kroft: I mean, you've got them coming and you've got them going if they're a Republican. If they sign the pledge and break it they're toast. And if they don't sign the pledge they're probably toast.

Norquist: But if they sign it and keep it, they win the primary. They win the general. They get to govern. And, I've helped make all this possible.