



## With Five Weeks to Go, the Supercommittee Has Stalled

With five weeks to go to create an agreement that will cut at least \$1.2 trillion from the federal budget over the next ten years, there are few indications that the Supercommittee will propose anything substantial.



Despite demands from the co-chairs of the committee, Senators Patty Murray and Jeb Hensarling, that members not speak publicly about their work, Robert Pear, writing for the *New York Times*, was able to glean some insight into any progress the committee is making. According to a person working for the committee, members are still hovering at 30,000 feet, with no landing field in sight. Members are still asking, What is the baseline? Are we doing tax reform? In other words, even basic agreements of how to measure progress have yet to be hammered out.

Rep. Chris Van Hollen, a member of the committee, admitted that the jury is still out on whether it could agree on where to find the \$1.2 trillion in savings. Members of the committee have expressed exasperation about Sen. John Kerry's rantings during the closed-door sessions: Kerry just talks a lot, according to a House Republican aide. It's what I would call Senate talk. It's like a waterfall of words. It never gets you anywhere. Another who has attended some of the committee's sessions agreed: Kerry is very aspirational.. People hope he will come down to earth. One of Kerry's aides defended his ramblings, explaining that Kerry thinks out loud, running through the options in his mind. He vocalizes options that may cause distress. In sum, the more Kerry talks and the more time he takes in the committee meetings, the less people are likely to pay attention or get anything substantial accomplished.

Another insider familiar with the Supercommittee's proceedings said Basically we are going in circles. It's going very, very slowly. The only way this will work is if the leaders decide they want to get a deal and lay down parameters. Everybody is sitting around sucking their thumbs until they get some guidance on what to do.

Senator Orrin Hatch, not a Supercommittee member, said My impression is they are not progressing too rapidly things are not moving too fast.

Part of the problem is the conflicts of interest represented by the committee of 12. The Center for Responsive Politics [discovered](#) that since 1990 the members of the committee have raised more than \$50 million from financial, insurance, and real estate interests, so that any serious talk about elimination of various tax breaks is going to be met with resistance, to say nothing of cutting entitlement spending such as Medicare or Social Security.

Another issue is ideological. Despite the [marginalization](#) of any Tea Party interests on the panel the



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Republicans appear to be sticking to their no tax increase pledge, while the Democrats are intransigent in their demand that entitlement cuts must be matched with tax increases. As Patrick Buchanan [noted](#), Republicans cannot agree to tax increases without risking retribution from the[ir] base and repudiation by its presidential candidates. As for the hundreds of billions in Great Society spending for Medicaid, food stamps, Head Start, earned income tax credits, aid to education, Pell grants and housing subsidies, [Democrats] will [not] permit significant cuts.

That leaves just one item vulnerable to cuts by the committee: defense spending. With \$350 billion of cuts already scheduled over the next ten years, if the Supercommittee fails to come up with something by November 23rd, there will be another \$600 billion in cuts. According to House Armed Services Committee Chair Buck McKeon, such cuts would mean a reduction of 150,000 troops, retirement of two carrier battle groups, a loss of one-third of the Air Forces fighter planes, as well as the termination of the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter.

Defense hawk Senator John McCain has already said that if the committee cannot come up its mandated cuts, and thus these defense cuts will take place, he will consider it a failure on the part of the Supercommittee [and] we will be amongst the first on the floor to nullify that provision. Congress is not bound by this. Its something we passed. We can reverse it.

Knowing that if the committee is unable to come up with something acceptable by the deadline Congress will override the mandated cuts anyway removes any incentive for the members to get down to business. Its another reflection of how business is done (or not done) in Washington: make lots of noise, but dont touch the goodies. As [noted by Michael Tennant](#), They can just wait out the deadline, after which members of each party can blame the opposing party for the committees failure, and Congress will see to it that no spending reductions actually take place.

*Photo: Supercommittee member Sen. Max Baucus, (D-Mont.) left, speaks with fellow panelist Sen. Rob Portman, (R-Ohio) on Capitol Hill, Sept. 22, 2011: AP Images*



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