Briefing

The man who killed tax increases

Anti-tax activist Grover Norquist holds no office, but wields enormous power in Washington. What are his goals?

Who is Grover Norquist?
He's a conservative activist best known as the head of Americans for Tax Reform, a taxpayer advocacy group that is opposed to any and all tax increases. A fierce partisan who once referred to bipartisanship as "date rape," Norquist argues that taxation is inherently oppressive, and that Big Government is a burden on the American people. "The government's power to control one's life derives from its power to tax," he says in his organization's mission statement. "We believe that power should be minimized." He's called for abolishing such agencies as the Food and Drug Administration, the Department of Education, and the National Endowment for the Arts; he famously once said that he hoped to shrink government until he could "drown it in a bathtub." Democrats like journalist Arianna Huffington view Norquist as "the dark wizard of the Right's anti-tax cult." Former House Speaker Newt Gingrich calls him "the single most effective conservative activist in the country."

What makes him effective?
His single-minded focus on one goal—to make it impossible for politicians to raise taxes for any reason, including to balance budgets. In 1985, the Reagan administration set up Americans for Tax Reform to lobby in favor of overhauling the tax code. Reagan installed the 29-year-old Norquist, who wore an acorn at the Chamber of Commerce, as its chairman. To ensure that future Congresses would not reverse Reagan-era tax cuts, Norquist wrote the Taxpayer Protection Pledge, an oath made by lawmakers directly to their constituents never to support tax increases of any kind. More than 1,200 federal, state, and local Republican officeholders have signed the oath, which has become a litmus test for true conservative values. Those who violate it often face primary challenges from candidates Norquist endorses.

How powerful is that pledge?
It's had enormous influence. In the current Congress, 235 congressmen and 41 senators have signed the pledge; only seven Republican congressmen and seven senators have not. Thanks largely to Norquist's efforts, tax increases have become political suicide, and Americans now pay the lowest percentage of their incomes in federal taxes since 1958. Republicans, in fact, are refusing even to consider any tax increases in their current battle with Democrats over the debt ceiling. Norquist says Republicans learned a valuable lesson when President George H.W. Bush broke the pledge and raised taxes to plug a budget deficit in 1990, and then lost to Bill Clinton. "He gets thrown out of the office by a bum—a nobody from Arkansas," Norquist says. "The message was: You can't break the pledge."

How did Norquist develop his philosophy?
Norquist grew up in a well-to-do family in Weston, Mass., the son of a Polaroid executive. He remembers gravitating to conservative views as far back as the sixth grade, and at 12, he volunteered for Richard Nixon's 1968 presidential campaign. An excellent student, he later graduated from Harvard University and Harvard Business School, where he delighted in challenging the liberal status quo. "I've been a 'winger' from way back," Norquist says. "I was an anti-communist first, and then I became an economic conservative. I think I've gotten more radical, as I've gotten older." Bearded and bespectacled, the 56-year-old Norquist today has an owlish, professorial manner and is considered something of a raconteur in Beltway circles.

How has he used his influence?
Name a landmark Republican policy of the past 20 years, and chances are that Norquist was involved. He helped Gingrich author the "Contract With America" in 1994, recruited wary "movement conservatives" to support George W. Bush's run for president in 2000, and played a major role in crafting the Bush tax cuts in 2001. Norquist has also served as the chief antagonist of conservative factions at weekly meetings, known as the "leave-us-alone coalition." He even has a chart, "The Norquist bowl," that brings together policymakers, reporters, and activists for informal discussions about the future direction of the Republican Party.

Do all conservatives like him?
No. Some see him as something of an unacceptable extreme on tax issues; he recently feuded with Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker, and several other Republican senators because they had voted to eliminate $6 billion in ethanol subsidies to farmers. Norquist insists that removing existing tax breaks violates the pledge. Social conservatives view Norquist with distrust because he's primarily a libertarian and an on the board of GOProud, a conservative gay-rights group. Norquist spoke out against the Iraq war as a waste of money in 2004, and because he founded the Islamic Free Market Institute to foster business links with the Muslim world. Since he is married to a Palestinian Muslim, Samah Alrayyes, some neocons have even questioned whether he is an "agent of influence for Islamists in Washington." Norquist dismisses these criticisms as a distraction from the real battle, which is to keep cutting taxes and shrinking government. "My ideal citizen is the self-employed, homeschooling, IRA [Individual Retirement Account]-owning guy with a concealed-carry permit," he says. "Because that person doesn't need the goddamn government for anything."

The Reaganites’ Reaganes

Ronald Reagan has become a near-sacred figure to most modern Republicans, but Norquist puts even the party's most ardent Reaganites to shame. Norquist cut his teeth as one of Reagan's key anti-communist activists in the mid-1980s, travelling with Col. Oliver North to spread the Reagan Doctrine to places like Nicaragua, Afghanistan, Mozambique, and Angola. It was Reagan who tapped Norquist to head up Americans for Tax Reform in 1985. To show his gratitude and admiration, Norquist founded the Reagan Legacy Project in 1997, which aims to rename something after the 40th president in every one of the country's 3,143 counties. Norquist successfully lobbied to change the name of Washington National Airport to Reagan National, and he has waged an unsuccessful campaign to carve Reagan's face on Mount Rushmore. He's still battling to get Reagan's face on U.S. currency. "Within the next 10 years, when we have the next Republican president, Reagan will be on the $10, $20, $50, or the dime," he said. "I guarantee he absolutely will."