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Jon Kyl's search-and-destroy mission

By [Dana Milbank](#), Published: November 22

Jon Kyl is different from you and me.

In the days following Hurricane Katrina, the nation was reeling over the death and destruction in New Orleans and along the Gulf Coast. But Kyl, now the No. 2 Republican in the Senate, saw opportunity: According to [a voice-mail recording](#) left at the time by Sen. Jeff Sessions (R-Ala.), Kyl and Sessions were hoping to find a business owner killed in the storm so they could use that in their campaign to repeal the estate tax.

It was vintage Kyl: cold and ruthless.

So when the Arizonan was named as one of six Republicans on the debt supercommittee, Democrats feared the worst — and they got what they feared. It exaggerates little to say that Kyl thwarted agreement almost singlehandedly. While some Republicans on the panel — notably Reps. Dave Camp and Fred Upton — were, with House Speaker John Boehner's blessing, prepared to strike a deal, Kyl rallied resistance with his usual table-pounding tirades.

The tragedy here is that Kyl, who has announced his retirement at the end of his term, could have risen above political pressures to strike an agreement to right the nation's finances for a generation. Boehner's House Republicans, aware that voters will hold them to account for inaction, were willing to deal. But Kyl's Senate Republicans, hoping voters will evict the Democratic majority in the Senate, had no such incentive.

The sabotage began on the very first day the supercommittee met. While other members from both parties spoke optimistically about the need to put everything on the table, Kyl gave a gloomy opening statement. "I think a dose of realism is called for here," [he said](#). That same day, he went to a luncheon organized by conservative think tanks and threatened to walk [\("I'm off the committee"\)](#) if there were further defense cuts.

When Democrats floated their proposal combining tax increases and spending cuts, Kyl rejected it out of hand, citing Republicans' pledge to activist Grover Norquist not to raise taxes. Kyl's constant invocation of the Norquist pledge provoked Senate Majority Leader

Harry Reid (D-Nev.) to snap at Kyl during a private meeting: “What is this, high school?”

Kyl's defenders say his motives were pure because he had every incentive for the supercommittee to succeed: He never has to face voters again and he desperately wanted to avoid the automatic Pentagon cuts that now loom. But there's little doubt that he was doing Norquist's bidding in killing any notion of higher taxes.

Norquist, who worked to defeat a compromise, brags about his control over Kyl. When Kyl made remarks in May that appeared to leave open the possibility of tax increases, Norquist called Kyl and adopted “the tone of a teacher scolding a second grader as he recalled the conversation,” [Politico reported](#). Norquist boasted to the publication that, after he upbraided Kyl, the senator “went down on the floor and he gave a colloquy about how we're against any tax increases of any sort. Boom!”

While other supercommittee members on both sides searched for a grand bargain, Kyl countered with suggestions that they focus on small items, such as selling off federal property. On Monday, when Sen. John Kerry (D-Mass.) made his last-ditch effort to salvage a deal, observers knew the effort was going nowhere for one simple reason: Kyl was in the room. He divided his time between the “negotiations” and [barbed interviews](#) with TV networks: “Can I make a point? . . . Your job isn't to convince me. . . . Let me make this point to you. . . . Let me just finish my sentence.”

Kyl had demonstrated his distaste for negotiation before. In June, he joined House Majority Leader Eric Cantor (R-Va.) in [walking out of budget talks](#) with Vice President Biden. He had also displayed his disdain for fellow Republicans who were willing to negotiate. During the health-care debate, when Sen. Chuck Grassley (R-Iowa) was negotiating with Democrats on the Senate Finance Committee, Kyl went on TV and said Grassley “has been given no authority to negotiate anything.” Amid hints that GOP leaders might punish Grassley by denying him the top Republican slot on the Judiciary Committee, Grassley reportedly told colleagues: [“Maybe I should just go home and ride my tractor.”](#)

“Walking napalm” is how one Democratic aide involved in the supercommittee described Kyl this week. And if the senator makes some mistakes as he burns down the village — well, that's just a cost of doing business. Earlier this year, when Kyl was leading an effort to cut off funding for Planned Parenthood, he claimed on the Senate floor that abortion is “well over 90 percent of what Planned Parenthood does.” [The actual number is 3 percent.](#) An aide to Kyl explained: “His remark was [not intended to be a factual statement.](#)”

As Kyl leaves the Senate, he will be remembered as a lawmaker who intended to be not factual but destructive.

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