

Deficit talks: Murray says she never gave up

Sen. Patty Murray, who co-chaired the congressional deficit-reduction committee, said she was hopeful a deal could be struck up until the last moment Monday when the panel finally threw in the towel.

By [Kyung M. Song](#)

Seattle Times Washington bureau

WASHINGTON —

The most remarkable thing about the failure of the deficit-reduction supercommittee, co-chaired by Sen. Patty Murray, to overcome the deep partisan rift over taxes and spending may be that it tried at all.

Yet, Murray said Monday she never stopped believing the bipartisan Joint Select Committee on Deficit Reduction could succeed where so many others had not.

"I felt hopeful every single hour of every single day for the last three months, even through today," the Washington Democrat said Monday, less than two hours after she and her co-chair, Rep. Jeb Hensarling, R-Texas, officially acknowledged the panel's failure.

Murray, who had studiously avoided partisan rhetoric after being appointed by Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid to the panel in August, pinned the blame squarely on Republicans. The GOP, she said, would not yield in its opposition to raising taxes on wealthier Americans to blunt the effects of spending cuts to social programs for the less affluent.

As co-chair, Murray repeatedly had urged the panel's six Democrats and six Republicans to avoid "drawing lines in the sand." Instead, she repeated her party's refrain that any deficit-reduction plan must include "shared sacrifices" by the rich — which in the end turned out to be the Democrats' line in the sand.

In the end, Murray said she concluded that no deal was better than one that didn't ask wealthy Americans to pay more taxes.

The automatic budget cuts triggered by the committee's failure are "pretty painful," she said, "but I can't put something on the table that balances the entire problem that we have on the backs of a few people, which is what happens when you just go after the spending and the entitlements."

Despite the committee's failure, few observers laid the blame at the feet of the panel members, or even with Murray and Hensarling.

"We have a fundamental disagreement about the role of government," said Michael Tanner, senior fellow for domestic-policy issues with the libertarian Cato Institute. "You can't expect 12 people to come to an agreement in weeks. This is something that has to play out over a couple of election cycles."

Tanner contends the deficit panel's work was made inherently difficult by the fact that it was composed of sitting members of Congress who were hand-picked proxies for their respective parties.

"The supercommittee members are simply creatures of their leadership," Tanner said.

Murray, however, insisted the panel's work largely was shaped by the respective experiences and principles that each of the 12 members brought to the task. And she said her grasp of the complex task of curbing the deficit has grown deeper.

"I see the challenges differently today than I did three months ago," Murray said.

She said she believes if more members of Congress acquired a nuanced understanding of the fiscal challenges, "more of us would reach a tipping point" to make a compromise deal possible.

Paul Van de Water, a senior fellow at the liberal Center on Budget and Policy Priorities in Washington, D.C., said much of the supercommittee's dealings were conducted out of public view, making it difficult to assess Murray's influence.

Van de Water noted that what little breakthrough there was in the negotiations came from plans apparently spearheaded by Sen. Max Baucus, D-Mont., the Senate Finance Committee chair, and Sen. Pat Toomey, R-Pa., former head of the conservative Club for Growth.

Murray said she took her position as the co-chair to mean doing whatever it took to get the job done.

"I did everything," she said. "It was 24/7."

In a statement, Baucus lauded Murray as a problem solver who pushed hard to break through the stalemate.

"There aren't many people on Capitol Hill who can build bridges like Patty can," Baucus said. "Patty is the one you want at the helm when you have to make tough choices, and she set the tone for members to make those tough decisions and move our country forward."

But Lanny Davis, a Washington, D.C., lawyer and a former legal adviser to President Clinton, said he believes Murray and, ultimately, President Obama missed a real chance to take up Toomey's offer to increase revenue by \$300 billion over 10 years — which

Democrats rejected because in exchange it would have cut income taxes for millionaires even further, and which divided Republicans who objected to revenue increases of any kind.

"Any kind of a deal is better than failure," said Davis, a lobbyist who specializes in crisis communications. He contends even modest amounts of new revenue would help the economy more than the 10-year, \$1.2 trillion in automatic spending cuts scheduled to kick in 2013.

So not only did the supercommittee accomplish nothing, Davis said, "the worst part of this is that it confirms the dysfunction in government."