

Stephen King's epic novel "The Stand" begins with a laboratory accident on a U.S. military base. The Army is experimenting with germ warfare when things go haywire with a superflu, known as Captain Trips.

But before officials can quarantine the base, one man and his family escapes. And they're already infected with Captain Trips.

The contaminated family then carries the superflu with them, infecting practically everyone with whom they come in contact. A pandemic ensues, killing 99 percent of the world's population.

All because the Army failed to prevent the escape of one infected family.

Once it's out, they can't contain it.

For nearly two months, the 12 members of the Congressional supercommittee, charged with paring \$1.2 trillion in federal spending by the end of the year, have toiled like cloistered monks. A veil of secrecy cloaked their negotiations as they mulled potential deficit reduction proposals and programs which could meet the budget axe.

Knowing all too well that chatter could doom the talks, the supercommittee members seemingly took a vow of secrecy, hermetically sealing off their deliberations.

Day after day, Capitol Hill scribes would prowl after the supercommittee members, hoping to pry loose a nugget of information or a flash of color about the talks. Instead, supercommittee members doled out platitudes about the sessions being "productive" or "making progress" and then speed walk away.

"The 12 are being very circumspect with their colleagues as well as the press," said House Minority Whip Steny Hoyer (D-MD) Tuesday. "A big deal is going to be a controversial deal."

And like Stephen King's supervirus Captain Trips, descriptions and accounts of deficit reduction talks remained safely quarantined, cordoned off in a sterilized Congressional laboratory.

Everyone understands the toxicity of the discussions going on in the supercommittee. Negotiations about trimming defense spending, to say nothing of Medicare and Medicaid, can be as virulent politically as a strain of the Ebola or Junín viruses.

So the security measures the supercommittee arranged to wall off its discussions worked very well.

Until this week.

And like the Army employee infected with superflu, tearing out of the military base in "The Stand," something contaminated the supercommittee talks this week.

It was the same quintessentially Washington pathogen which infects every political campaign, presidential administration, cabinet agency and Congressional office. Like Ebola and Junín, this virus can also be deadly.

In politics, this deadly scourge is known as a "leak."

Once it's out, they can't contain it.

The first leak from the supercommittee came in the form of a proposal presented by Senate Finance Committee Chairman and supercommittee member Max Baucus (D-MT). Baucus discussed a plan to trim \$3 trillion in spending over a decade. Baucus's idea calls for revenue hikes, as much as \$300 billion in "stimulus" spending and chops \$400 billion from Medicare.

"That should not leak," fretted Rep. Norm Dicks (D-WA). "They have to contain these things."

While this is just one proposal, the firestorm brewing over potential reductions in entitlements reflects the controversy Steny Hoyer spoke of.

"It's distressing to see that the first major move to come out of the supercommittee hurts our seniors," said Rep. Dennis Kucinich (D-OH).

And it should be no surprise that a group of liberal Democrats staged a rally outside the Capitol Wednesday afternoon protesting proposed reductions in entitlements.

"We're telling the supercommittee to keep their hands off Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid, period," said Rep. John Conyers (D-MI). "No exceptions."

The leak itself is interesting enough. But what could be more telling is the reason for the leak.

Strategic leaking to achieve particular goals is considered to be one of the most elite forms of political alchemy practiced in Washington. Leakers rarely leak without motive.

Obviously, such Draconian cuts to social safety net programs won't sit well with Democrats nor be the type of information they want out there. That suggests the leak could have originated with Republicans who aim to foment dissent among Democrats.

That said, even if Baucus concocted the plan, it's been widely reported that while some of the Democrats on the supercommittee supported the idea, others did not. This could be an effort by disgruntled supercommittee Democrats to leak and quash Baucus's approach. Moreover, those who endorse the plan may have leaked in an effort to court Republicans. The \$3 trillion goal is well above the requirement of \$1.2 in cuts. So the leak could serve as a benchmark to Republicans that Democrats are serious about slashing spending. Or it could be a dare by Democrats to show that they are willing to cut even deeper than the traditionally fiscally-conscious Republicans. After weeks of closed door talks, a public leak could be a negotiating ploy to engage the other side. Or it could serve as a trial balloon as negotiators want to gauge public reaction.

Timing could also be a plausible explanation for leaking at this time.

A leak at this stage could also be expected, simply because the supercommittee is getting close to the point where hours of jawboning and hypotheses must be converted into concrete dollar figures on paper. A leak could also represent tension between the sides or intra-party squabbles. Or it could signify that they are actually getting close and making hard choices.

That said, most Washington hands interpret a leak as a bad thing. Especially when the leak emanates from a panel that's been so disciplined about its work.

Rep. Scott Garrett (R-NJ) offered a full menu of reasons as to why a leak may come now. He's skeptical about the supercommittee's chances for success. And Garrett says the leak could indicate the internal state of affairs on the panel.

"They're trying to get something done," said Rep. Scott Garrett (R-NJ). "And once things break down, they can say 'we tried,'"

Rep. John Campbell (R-CA) agreed with Garrett.

"The frustration generates a leak," said **Campbell**. **"Let's say they don't come up with much. Everyone in there will say it wasn't because I didn't try. Everyone will want to say**

'Here's what I wanted to do.'

So how does one stop a leak in Washington?

The most famous effort originated in the Nixon White House. Nixon covertly empanelled E. Howard Hunt and G. Gordon Liddy to serve as "plumbers" to plug the drip-drip-drip of classified information which was finding its way into the press. But the mission of the plumbers soon went awry once they broke into the Watergate building.

Generally, leaks don't stop. Which is why those who have marveled at the restraint of the supercommittee wonder if this is just the start of a gusher.

Either way, a leak coming from a panel as elite and clandestine as the supercommittee is much like the superflu released in Stephen King's novel. It has the potential to kill a lot before its contained. Reactions to potential Medicare cuts demonstrate the lethality of this leak.

So a political leak like this one, once out of the lab, can be pretty deadly.

It's now up to the supercommittee to craft an antidote.