

Complete Interview Transcript

THE WASHINGTON TIMES

During the past two weeks, Sen. Tom Coburn, Oklahoma Republican, used an arcane parliamentary procedure to seize control of the Senate floor and force fellow senators to vote on individual pork projects they had inserted into an emergency spending bill for war and for hurricane relief. Charles Hurt, Capitol Hill bureau chief for The Washington Times, interviewed Mr. Coburn last week:

Q: There were a lot of Republican senators who voted to keep the \$700 million "railroad to nowhere," but turned around and voted against the overall spending bill on the grounds that it was too bloated with extra spending.

A: But they didn't offend the chairman of the Appropriations Committee.

Q: When you started out, you predicted you could save as much as \$2.68 billion of the \$14 billion in pork that senators inserted in the "emergency" war spending bill. How much were you ultimately successful at eliminating?

A: \$15 million. But remember, we're not measuring it that way. This is a long-term strategy to change behavior in the Congress and to change that behavior by exciting the American people and having them start paying attention. And they are. It's amazing. You saw the NBC/Wall Street Journal poll on earmarks. How in the world did earmarks get to be the highest level [of concern among voters]? It got to be the highest level by the "Bridge to Nowhere," the bloggers that we're using, the attacks that we're making. If something's not going to go through an authorizing process, then the American people deserve to have it debated on the floor.

The strategy is to raise the level to where you pique the American people's interest in it so they demand change. The wonderful thing about our country is American people still control it. And if they become aware and engaged, things change. Our strategy all along is to use the Senate to engage the American people to demand change. So, raising that level is what I'm trying to do.

Do you go home and explain that even though Mississippi has a great plan for reinvigorating their Gulf Coast, that we should pay for moving a \$750 million railroad so they can have about \$10 billion in new property available, for the state of Mississippi. I mean, how do you explain it? So, if we educate the American people enough on to where they ask good questions, you can't defend it. You can't defend that vote.

Q: There were 15 amendments on individual spending proposals you withdrew. Why did you withdraw them?

A: The larger point. What you do is you irritate, irritate, but you don't want to cause bleeding. We made our point. You can do it to the point where you totally alienate people or you can make your point and have caused enough pain to draw attention to the problem without alienating your ability to do it again. I had made my point. You'd be surprised by the number of people who didn't vote with me that came back up to me and said, "You keep doing what you're doing." That's a positive signal to say they know in their heart we got to change this system, but they're not at the point yet where they can figure out politically that they can be with me.

Q: Describe some of the interaction on the floor between you and Appropriations Committee Chairman Thad Cochran, the Mississippi Republican.

A: The only time it got tense is when he tried to cut off my right to speak. I went to him after he called that vote and I said, "We can do it one of a couple of ways. If you're going to object to letting me speak, then we're not going to do much except I'm going to be objecting all day to anything you want to do. I'm not going to take up a lot of time; my goal is not to string it out. If you're not going to allow me that privilege, then we're not going to move very fast."

He said, "You're right. I shouldn't have cut you off." You know, it's irritating to a chairman to have some young punk come up and challenge what you're doing and challenge the system that's been working here for a number of years. I understand that.

I love Thad Cochran. I think he's a great guy. He's working hard for Mississippi. I just don't think some of the stuff is a legitimate cost for the federal taxpayer. I didn't have any tense moment with anything else for me. It may have been for them, but it wasn't for me.

Q: Last year, former Appropriations Committee Chairman Ted Stevens was so furious when you tried killing his "Bridge to Nowhere," he threatened to quit the Senate.

A: I was worried I was going to have to resuscitate him on the [Senate] floor. But even he admits we're starting to make some headway.

Q: You don't have easy relations with Mr. Stevens and Mr. Cochran off the floor, do you?

A: I have easy relations with Thad. To me, this is business. The great thing about Ted Stevens is he's a very forgiving man. He's pleasant, cordial to me. The thing about Ted is you have to be straightforward with him about what you're going to do. He knew I was going to offer that amendment. We didn't hide it from him when we did the "Bridge to Nowhere." I don't surprise these people with what I'm going to do. You think anybody in Congress doesn't know that I'm going to be looking at every earmark that gets on there?

The real deal here is, I don't get my significance from being a senator. What I want to do is change to secure the future. I'm willing to get beat up. Losing is not a bad deal for

me. Doing the right thing is the right thing. What happens when you lose is you advance the debate. For too often up here, people have been afraid to lose, and that's why a lot of the American people doesn't know what's going on.

We won the "Bridge to Nowhere." We wouldn't been nearly as successful this time, because we raised awareness. Why is it that we went from 15 votes on the "Bridge to Nowhere" to 47 and 48 votes this time? What do you think has changed? The American public is awake. They're aware of it, and elected leaders are paying attention.

Q: Given your dissatisfaction with how Congress works, did the Framers make a mistake when they formed this government?

A: No, I don't think so. I think there's a fundamental flaw in how we've tied re-election campaigns to earmarking and to gerrymandering and to careerism. We've so advantaged incumbency through the process. Every Framer, with the exception with Alexander Hamilton, believed in rotation. Rotation is term limits. They didn't think they needed it because they never thought anybody would want to spend a career, their entire life, in Washington. So, if they made a mistake, that was the mistake they made -- not incorporating in the Constitution the concept of rotation.

Q: Why do you insist upon keeping your doctor's practice despite Senate rules to prohibit a member of Congress from drawing a paycheck from outside government?

A: It keeps me connected to real people. It takes me from a position of senator and brings me down to a level where I get to relate to people as a non-politician, and I get to be a regular citizen. I get all sorts of insight from patients. On Monday, I'll see about 15 patients before I come back up here. And I will learn great things from them about the problems, about social ills, about access to [health] care. I promised -- I promised -- I would maintain my practice when I campaigned. And I don't break promises.

Q: How do you get around the Senate rule?

A: I'm practicing for free. It's costing me a ton. I'm having to pay my nurses, pay my rent, pay my malpractice [insurance] out of my pocket. It's going to run me about \$80,000 a year.

Q: Many Democrats enjoy your agitating top Republicans and vote with you on some of your amendments. What discussions have you had with Minority Leader Harry Reid and other Democrats about your strategy?

A: There's two reasons they're with me. One is political, to make us look worse. But there's always more Republicans voting with me than Democrats. Number Two is that the people I have a good relationship with and have a great deal of respect for, like Russ Feingold and Barack Obama, recognize that even though their philosophy on government is much different than mine -- on the role of government to be involved in so many things -- that unless we control spending, the very things they want to do for people aren't going to be available.

I mean, in nine years, we hit the tank. If you believe you want to do more government, the only way you're going to do it is make sure you're not wasting government now. What I hope to build is a relationship between conservatives and liberals that recognizes that our financial status is so dire that we have to work together.

What the American people want – what they want us to do – is to not be Democrats and Republicans. They want us to be Americans. They're sick of the partisanship. What is the partisanship all about? It's about the next election. It's not about philosophy, it's about who gains power in the next election. They don't like it, and I don't like it.

Q: Do you think Bill Frist would make a good president?

A: I think Bill Frist is a great guy. I haven't made any decisions on any of those guys. You know, lots of senators want to be president. That's part of the problem. I do think it's a very tough job to be a majority leader and try to run for president at the same time.

Q: Why?

A: Just because you have two things you're trying to accomplish, and sometimes they're in conflict. What is best for a run at president may not be best for majority leader position.

Q: Is there a good example from, say, this week?

A: No, and I probably wouldn't go any further.

Q: Would you ever run for president?

A: No.

Q: Why?

A: Because I want to stay married. And, look, I have some real goals in my life. I've not committed to a second term. I've been through two cancers. I'm in my third year of my second one. I have four grandchildren. I'm hoping to get a whole lot more. The reason I'm here is because of grandchildren – everybody's grandchildren. But if I'm here, then I'm not spending the time with my own grandkids.

I don't have any desire for higher office. Think about how much fun it is to be involved with a young couple who gives birth to their children. There is nothing greater than to see the tears of a mother and a father as their newborn baby is pulled out and put on the mama's tummy. You compare that to any buzz I get up here – it doesn't compare.

Q: What do you think will happen in the November elections?

A: I've never been a political animal.

Q: There were 19 Republicans who signed the letter urging President Bush to veto the bloated spending bill, then voted the very same day to spend \$700 million on the "Railroad to Nowhere."

A: They're playing the inside game: How do you not alienate the chairman right now because you got things in the works.

Q: Do you think there would be any advantage to Republicans losing their majority in either the House or the Senate this November?

A: We have a wonderful republic. How do we preserve that? I don't know the answer to that question. But I do know the collective wisdom at the polls most often is better than our collective wisdom here. America's not going to be hurt if that happens in the long run. It may fall back in the short run. But if that were to happen, it would refocus the Republicans on what they really stand for.

No one is doing their job – Democrats or Republicans – as far as making the government efficient. I'll never vote for a tax increase until we've done the hard work of not wasting the money that's there.