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Former U.S. Sen. Tom Coburn dies at 72

by **CHRIS CASTEEL**

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Oklahoma US Senator Tom Coburn speaks to citizens at a town hall meeting at the University of Central Oklahoma in Edmond, OK, Saturday, Feb. 4, 2012. By Paul Hellstern, The Oklahoman

Former U.S. Sen. Tom Coburn, a physician who became a powerful voice in Congress on government spending and waste, died early Saturday after a long fight with prostate cancer. He was 72.

Coburn, a Republican from Muskogee, served in the Senate from 2005 to 2015 and in the U.S. House of Representatives from 1995 to 2001. After leaving the Senate, he pushed for a constitutional convention and advocated for a range of conservative fiscal causes.

A statement from Coburn's family said, "Because of his strong faith, he rested in the hope found in John chapter 11 verse 25 where Jesus said, 'I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me, will live, even though they die.' Today he lives in heaven."

A memorial service will be held at a later date and will be announced, the family said.

Coburn is survived by his wife of 51 years, Carolyn; daughters Sarah, Katie, and Callie; and nine grandchildren.

"He's been fighting up to the very end," a friend said Saturday. "He was fighting for all of the things he still believed in."

Vice President Mike Pence said, "Sen. Tom Coburn was a great conservative voice in the United States Congress and American physician whose legacy will live on."

Coburn, whose medical practice focused primarily on obstetrics, won a U.S. House seat in 1994 in the Republican wave year that gave the GOP a House majority for the first time in decades. He limited himself to three terms and did not run for reelection in 2000.

U.S. Rep. Tom Cole, R-Moore, who, as a political consultant ran Coburn's first campaign in 1994, said Saturday, "He was an Oklahoma original — a politician who hated politics. He disliked campaigns, but he never lost an election. Voters appreciated his strong conservative views, his candor and his honesty as a person."

In 2004, Coburn ran for the Senate, entering the race relatively late, but he still easily beat the Republican field and then defeated former U.S. Rep. Brad Carson in the general election. He was in the same freshman class as eventual President Barack Obama, and the two senators and their wives became friends.

Obama, after his first State of the Union speech in 2009, hugged Coburn on the House floor, a moment that was caught on television. Some Oklahomans weren't happy.

"We had about 50 letters that were highly critical of him hugging me and me hugging him," Coburn told The Oklahoman a few days later. "But you need to separate the difference in political philosophy versus friendship. How better to influence somebody than love them?"

When Coburn announced his resignation in 2014, with two years left of his second term, Obama, a Democrat, said, "Tom and I entered the Senate at the same time, becoming friends after our wives struck up a conversation at an orientation dinner. And even though we haven't always agreed politically, we've found ways to work together — to make government more transparent, cut down on earmarks, and fight to reduce wasteful spending and make our tax system fairer."

'Dr. No'

Thomas Allen Coburn was born in Casper, Wyoming, in 1948 and grew up in Muskogee. He received his bachelor's degree in accounting from Oklahoma State University in 1970.

"It's a sad day for the CowboyFamily," OSU President Burns Hargis said on Twitter. "Our thoughts and prayers go out to the family of Tom Coburn."

Coburn went to work in Virginia in his family's business, Coburn Optical Industries. He decided to go to the University of Oklahoma medical school and graduated in 1983.

In office, Coburn talked frequently about how many babies he delivered — thousands — and he fought with the ethics committees of both houses to continue practicing medicine while serving, but he was mostly barred from doing so.

In the House and Senate, Coburn relentlessly attacked spending of all kinds from both parties, and likely had more influence than any other member in killing off the pork barrel system that gave lawmakers millions of dollars each to spread around their districts.

Unlike the many lawmakers who criticized pork barrel spending in general terms, Coburn targeted specific projects, including the so-called "Bridge to Nowhere" in Alaska. His battle on the Senate floor to strip funding for the project led the late Sen. Ted Stevens of Alaska to threaten to quit.

Coburn's take-no-prisoners approach on pork caused friction with many of his colleagues, including Oklahoma Republican Sen. Jim Inhofe, who was a champion of earmarks.

Inhofe said Saturday, "There was no one like Dr. Tom Coburn — in the Senate or in Oklahoma. He was respected by everyone for a lot of things, as a medical doctor, an intellectual, a fearless advocate against government waste, a sought after adviser. But more than that, he was a brother in Christ."

Coburn engaged in battles big and small over spending, blocking new programs that he considered duplicative and proposing major changes to Medicare and Social Security. He was dubbed "Dr. No" because he blocked so many bills. He and his staff compiled an annual "Wastebook" of spending items they considered frivolous.

Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell said Saturday that Coburn's "famous nickname 'Dr. No' did not fully capture Tom, because he did not let his strong principles sideline him from creative policymaking or bipartisan cooperation. Tom's convictions did not drive him away from the table. They inspired him to become a central player. It took him less than two terms to become a master of the oversight process and a crucial partner in major legislation."

Coburn worked with fellow Republicans and Democrats on some of the most intractable issues of his tenure, including immigration, health care reform, gun restrictions and the budget. The talks never yielded the grand compromises sought.

Social conservative

Coburn was also a social conservative, strictly anti-abortion and, critics said, anti-gay.

In Washington, he lived in the so-called "C Street" house which was owned by the group that sponsors the National Prayer Breakfast and drew controversy for its zoning status as a church and for some of the other people who lived there, including former U.S. Sen. John Ensign, who resigned because of a scandal involving a friend's wife.

Coburn, who met with a top aide to Ensign in trying to mediate a financial dispute for the Nevada senator, was admonished by the Senate Ethics Committee because the aide was barred by law from lobbying members of Congress.

Coburn battled cancer three times. In 2013, he was diagnosed with a recurrence of prostate cancer and underwent treatment for many months. When he announced his resignation in early 2014, he said he was not leaving because of his health. The senator had grown increasingly frustrated with the gridlock and the fact that legislating had ground to a halt.


Coburn was not a fan of Donald Trump during the 2016 campaign, and he was urged to mount an independent candidacy against him. He declined, as he did entreaties to run for president in previous years.

After leaving the Senate, he first worked unsuccessfully to rally enough states to hold a federal constitutional convention, with his main focus on a balanced budget amendment.

In 2018, after the Oklahoma Legislature approved a tax package to boost education funding, Coburn was part of a group that tried to start a petition drive aimed at repealing the taxes.

Coburn, a firm believer in term limits, also worked unsuccessfully against the reelection bid of U.S. Rep. Markwayne Mullin, who holds Coburn’s old House seat. Mullin had promised to serve only three terms but is now in his fourth.

Republican Sen. James Lankford, who won Coburn's seat in 2014, said Saturday, “Oklahoma has lost a tremendous leader, and I lost a great friend today. Dr. Coburn was an inspiration to many in our state and our nation. He was unwavering in his conservative values, but he had deep and meaningful friendships with people from all political and personal backgrounds. He was truly respected by people on both sides of the aisle.”



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Chris Casteel began working for The Oklahoman's Norman bureau in 1982 while a student at the University of Oklahoma. Casteel covered the police beat, federal courts and the state Legislature in Oklahoma City. From 1990 through 2016, he was the...

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