



The Lawton Constitution (Oklahoma)

November 13, 2009

<http://www.swoknews.com/main.asp?SectionID=11&SubSectionID=98>

Veterans agree with Coburn on vet bill

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A veterans' health care bill being debated in Washington should be extended to every veteran and Congress also has a duty to define a funding source for the costly legislation, U.S. Sen. Tom Coburn said Thursday.

The Oklahoma Republican was in Lawton to conduct a town hall meeting, a session that drew about 50 constituents who had questions and comments about various issues, including the Veterans Caregiver and Omnibus Health Benefits Act of 2009. Most at Thursday's meeting appeared to agree with objections posted by Coburn, who has drawn fire from legislators and veterans groups for his actions.

Coburn, who said he readily admits when he puts a hold on legislation, said he did block a Senate vote on the veterans bill but also conceded the bill will be considered and passed. He outlined two broad objections: Discrimination and cost.

"It's absolutely not paid for," he said, noting estimates place the cost of the bill at \$3.7 billion and the Senate won't consider his requests to identify funding cuts to help cover the cost of what he agrees is a good bill. "When you indenture the next generation, that's not freedom."

He said while he agrees with the bill's premise, it needs some adjustments because its provisions (providing health coverage to veterans not covered by the military health care system and to the primary caregivers of severely wounded veterans) are restricted to those who became veterans after 9-11.

Coburn, predicting the bill won't be passed until its provisions apply to all veterans, said he's willing to take the heat over his stance.

"I'm going to lay in front of the railroad tracks and get run over," he said, predicting the bill will be considered early next week. "I'm going to lose that."

Later in the meeting, one constituent said that he was willing to lie on the tracks with Coburn, to protest some of the bill's provisions, a comment that drew nods from others in the audience.

Bill Davis, chairman of the Comanche County Veterans Council, said he agreed with Coburn's financial objections.

"Why start another program that is unfunded?" Davis asked, then recommended Coburn look at Tri Care provisions because it is a benefit veterans are going to lose under the proposed bill.

Davis said he hopes the Senate tears the bill "into tiny, little pieces."

Coburn didn't reserve all his criticism for the veterans bill.

He also pointed to the ongoing debate on health care reform, saying Thursday that "people who are making decisions on health care never practiced a day in their life." Coburn, a physician who was forced to strictly limit his practice due to Senate regulations, said the proposed bill would divide a doctor's loyalty between his patient and the government, and the government's intrusion would violate the doctor-patient relationship.

His other objection: Expense.

"We're borrowing from our grandchildren," he said, noting the problem with Washington, D.C., legislators is that they're not listening to their constituents, who are saying they want changes made in the way Washington spends tax dollars.

When one veteran complained about comments Coburn allegedly made about military retirees and their promised benefits, Coburn said those comments were not quoted accurately by the media and others. He said while he believes the government should make good on its commitment to veterans, nothing — including veterans benefits — is sacrosanct when the federal government is finally pushed into making a decision about the budget and spending. Coburn said he is simply trying to push colleagues into addressing those expenditures now, adding it is time for debate because the nation can no longer afford the government it has.

Another veteran questioned the Tri Care health care system, noting, while the system may work in other areas of the country, it doesn't in southwest Oklahoma because there is only a small pool of doctors who accept the benefits. Coburn noted the man's objections to a government-run health care system, asking the audience if it heard that critique.

Coburn said his preference for health care is outlined in the Patients Choice Act he introduced. He noted the positive effects creative, privately maintained systems could bring, citing a national grocery chain which addressed its health care costs by offering its employees an incentive program. That incentive program was so successful, the company's health care costs haven't increased in two years, he said.

Other comments:

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In response to a woman's criticism of President Obama's plan to lift the cap on what the

government may borrow: “It’s going to pass,” Coburn said, adding he won’t be voting for it.

- The U.S. postal system: “Something has to give,” he said, explaining government must address revenue losses that are projected at \$8 billion next year.
- His response to a constituent who praised the success of Medicare’s Part D prescription drug program: It’s an unfunded mandate.



MICHAEL POPE/STAFF

U.S. Sen. Tom Coburn addresses constituents at Thursday’s town hall meeting at Great Plains Technology Center. Coburn answered questions about issues under discussion in Washington, D.C., most notably, health care reform and a health care bill aimed at veterans.