

Tom Coburn

A physician and Republican politician known for being fiscally and socially conservative.

Chapter 01 - 1:11

Introduction

Announcer: Tom Coburn is a physician, former congressman and senator from Oklahoma, and member of the Republican Party.

Coburn was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives in 1994 as part of the Republican Revolution. He upheld his campaign pledge to serve no more than three consecutive terms and did not run for re-election in 2000. In 2004, he returned to political life with a successful run for the U.S. Senate. Coburn was re-elected to a second term in 2010 and pledged not to seek a third term in 2016. In January 2014, Coburn announced he would retire before the expiration of his final term.

After leaving Congress, Coburn worked with the Manhattan Institute for Policy Research on its efforts to reform the Food and Drug Administration, becoming a senior fellow of the institute in December 2016. Coburn also serves as a senior advisor to Citizens for Self-Governance, where he has been active in calling for a convention to propose amendments to the United States Constitution.

In his oral history interview, we discuss Tom's decision to become a doctor, why he decided to run for public office and his health challenges. You can hear it now on VoicesofOklahoma.com.

Chapter 02 - 6:16

Move to Muskogee

John Erling: My name is John Erling. Today's date is May 4, 2016.

Tom, would you state your full name, please?

Tom Coburn: Thomas Allen Coburn.

JE: Your date of birth and your present age?

TC: 3/14/48, and I'm sixty-eight years of age.

JE: We are recording this interview in the recording facilities here at VoicesofOklahoma.com.
Where were you born?

TC: Casper, Wyoming.

JE: Your mother's name?

TC: Her maiden name?

JE: Yes.

TC: Anita Joy Allen.

JE: Where did she grow up and describe her personality for me.

TC: Oh, neat lady. She grew up in a small farming town in mid-central Oklahoma, Drummond, outside of Enid. Her parents ran a café. Her father was a World War I hero. Got the French Croix de Guerre. But had a difficult childhood because of alcohol.

But nevertheless, grew up, met my dad. My dad was an errand boy for American Optical.

JE: And your father's name?

TC: Went by Bill Coburn, O. W. Coburn. He started working when he was eleven years of age because of family needs. And met my mother, I think, at Crestor.

JE: Your father's personality, what kind of personality?

TC: He was outgoing, aggressive, go-getter, hard worker, taught us all how to work in our family. He had to, he had three siblings and a mother to support.

JE: How many brothers and sisters did you have?

TC: I had two brothers and a sister, one has since passed.

JE: Where are you in the birth order?

TC: I'm third.

JE: Your mother again, she was a nurturing type of woman, I—

TC: Oh, yeah, great woman. Lived until she was eighty-nine, just died four or five years ago.

JE: Your father then again, he was an optician?

TC: No, what he was, was a wholesale laboratory operator, but he started out as an errand boy for American Optical. Got a job with Tom Brown Optical, and then got a job with some other people, Bausch & Lomb, and American Optical. And he was in Casper working with a guy by the name of Jack Lamb in an independent wholesale laboratory up there. That's why I was born in Casper.

JE: But then he founded a company?

TC: Um-hmm (affirmative), he did.

JE: And the name of that was?

TC: Coburn Optical.

JE: Did he operate that for many years?

- TC:** Yes, he did, he built a rather successful business and had his brother join him about halfway through that. He was an optometrist who came and ran the sales side of it. And then three of us joined him, three boys joined, at one time, some was success and some not. But it was a family business; eventually went public and was sold.
- JE:** Interesting to note that the Oral Roberts law school was named in honor of your father. The O. W. Coburn School of Law, dedicated 1979. How did that relationship come about?
- TC:** That was through Charles Coffey, who was a brilliant lawyer here in Tulsa. And was his lawyer and thought that they needed a law school where they taught reconciliation instead of alienation. And my dad bought into that.
- JE:** So he must have contributed a significant amount of money.
- TC:** Yeah, I don't know what that was.
- JE:** If you have a name after him.
- TC:** Well, it didn't last because the law school was sent to Pat Robertson's school.
- JE:** Right, it was closed in 1985.
- TC:** Yeah, yeah.
- JE:** Professors included Anita Hill, interestingly enough.
- TC:** Uh-huh (affirmative).
- JE:** Who, of course, became part of the story of the nomination of Clarence Thomas. Did you ever meet her?
- TC:** No.
- JE:** Back to your education, the first school you remember attending? Elementary?
- TC:** Longfellow in Muskogee.
- JE:** Okay. In Muskogee.
- TC:** Um-hmm (affirmative).
- JE:** Okay, how do I get your family to Muskogee?
- TC:** They moved there from Casper, Wyoming. My father took a job for Tom Brown Optical in Muskogee.
- JE:** So then into high school, junior high school—
- TC:** Junior high, high school, all the way through.
- JE:** In Muskogee?
- TC:** Uh-huh (affirmative).
- JE:** When did you graduate from high school?
- TC:** 'Sixty-six.
- JE:** Then on to college?
- TC:** Um-hmm (affirmative), Oklahoma State.
- JE:** And what was your degree to be in?
- TC:** Accounting.

JE: In accounting?

TC: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: What were you thinking you were going to be?

TC: Business management, management. If you can account for it, you can manage it.

JE: Because you knew the family business was there.

TC: Well, yeah, and my dad wanted us to come in, so I did.

JE: This would be before your time, but December 7 1941, you weren't born, did it affect any of your family or hear any stories how it may have affected?

TC: Oh, sure. My dad and his two brothers were all in the military. My dad didn't stay long. When he was a young boy he got run over by a milk wagon and had some real bad vertebrae in his back. He was in the navy and they found out he couldn't scrub ships very well because of his fused back. So they decided they didn't want him.

But my other two brothers both fought in the Pacific, significant fights in the Pacific. And returned home.

JE: What year did you graduate from Oklahoma State?

TC: Nineteen seventy.

JE: Somewhere along the line you met a lady who was the 1967 Miss Oklahoma.

TC: Oh, I met her in the first grade.

JE: Oh, really? And her name?

TC: Carolyn Denton.

JE: You met her in the first grade?

TC: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: Was she the apple of your eye?

TC: Yeah, pretty much so. I mean, I never really seriously dated anybody other than her. I mean, she was my best friend for years before I ever asked her out on a date.

JE: Then somewhere in college or something you decided the two of you—

TC: Well, we decided we'd get married. We got married during the middle of her junior year.

JE: From your marriage you have three daughters?

TC: I have three daughters.

JE: And their names?

TC: Oldest is Callie, she is forty-six, she'll be forty-six this summer. Middle is Katie and she'll be forty-three. And Sarah, who will be thirty-eight, I guess, or thirty-nine.

JE: Sarah has become about as famous as you have through her operatic soprano singing.

TC: Hopefully more so.

JE: And she's quite accomplished, isn't she? national grand finalist in 2001, the Metropolitan Opera National Council auditions, voice was described as silvery, resonant soprano. Obviously you're terrible proud of her. Did she get all her singing skills from you?

TC: None. She gets them all from her mother and her mother's side of the family.

JE: Oh?

TC: You wouldn't even want me to sit next to you in church.

JE: [laughs] So does your wife sing?

TC: She did, I mean, when she was Miss Oklahoma that was her talent. She can sing, she just doesn't.

JE: But anyway, it's traced through—

TC: It's not traced through the Coburn lineage at all.

JE: [laughing]

Chapter 03 - 4:40

Vietnam

John Erling: In your days in college, the Vietnam War was on.

Tom Coburn: Uh-huh (affirmative).

JE: From 1955 to the fall of Saigon on April 30, 1975. What are your recollections of the Vietnam War and the protests? Because America was in not a very favorite war.

TC: There was a lot of consternation, but my observations are is that it was poorly handled leadership.

JE: Do you think it could have been presented to the—

TC: Well, they could have told the truth, they weren't telling the truth. The causality rates weren't accurate, they weren't telling the truth. They weren't telling the ground game truth, they weren't telling about not winning the hearts and minds of a lot of the South Vietnamese people. They just weren't telling the truth. When government doesn't tell the truth everything goes to pot. Integrity is what the rule of law is based on. You saw civil disobedience during that time. You saw more than civil disobedience during that time. You saw bombings, you saw all this other stuff.

You know, it's very similar to where we find ourselves today, in terms of lack of trust, and lack of confidence in the federal government.

JE: Right. So did you make any stands on it, public, I mean, were you—

TC: No, I was too busy trying to get an education. And, you know, I had a deferment up until my junior year. Then got drafted. I was going through induction the November that they did the first lottery. My induction was held in abeyance until after that lottery. And I drew 353.

JE: Hmm (thoughtful sound).

TC: So I didn't go. But my brother served but he didn't go to Vietnam. They sent him to South Korea. And my older brother served in the air force.

JE: You're talking about leadership. Lyndon Johnson was President through much of that.

TC: And so was Nixon.

JE: So was Richard Nixon, yes. And between both of them you're saying we didn't get the truth.

TC: You didn't get the truth out of McNamara, and you didn't get the truth out of the generals. You know, truth really matters. When you don't see that things fall apart.

JE: And then they were so mired in it, what could they do to get out?

TC: They just got out.

JE: Just ended it, right.

TC: Yeah, they just got out. With lots of lives sacrificed, lots of lives lost. And I'm not just talking Americans.

JE: It was a major disruptive force in the '68 Democratic Convention.

TC: Um-hmm (affirmative). Yeah.

JE: And that was it. People left, ran to Canada, burned their draft cards. No war is popular but certainly that was a very unpopular war.

And then it was interesting because as you heard about it, you just talked about it while you were in college. And as you were a senator you dealt with an issue from it and Agent Orange.

TC: Yeah.

JE: Talk to us about that because Agent Orange was a herbicide sprayed by the military for several years. And then maybe veterans were that they came back with a lot of problems as a result of it.

TC: Yeah. Yeah.

JE: You were opposed?

TC: Well, I thought science ought to determine who got benefits and who didn't. There's three specific—if I can recall—three specific disease conditions associated with Agent Orange. But the VA, through the decision of one VA administrator, started giving Agent Orange funds to everything that the cow brought home.

It's one thing to compensate people for an error, it's another thing to use it as a social program, which is what we've done when it comes to Agent Orange. We ought to compensate those people truly injured by Agent Orange. But we shouldn't be compensating people who weren't.

It's just like social security disability, it's a game. You know, how do you get the money out of the government to help you?

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

TC: And one of the oversight things I did in the Senate, they finally have just had a grand jury indict the doctor, a lawyer, and an administrative law judge and I hope they rot in jail. They're going to. And it happens all over this country.

So character and truth, they're malleable terms anymore in our country and we're seeing the consequences of it. Just look at the VA system. It's worse now than it was after all the stuff that came forward.

So Agent Orange was a real causative effect. We should have directed it toward those people who had direct proven scientific effects from it. And everybody else shouldn't have gotten the money.

JE: Right. The overall bill was approved 97 to 2.

TC: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: They said that veterans that have diabetes, prostate cancer, lung cancer, and blood-borne diseases would be now in care and benefits under the amendment that you're talking about.

TC: Yeah, except none of those diseases are associated with Agent Orange. Just go look at the medical history. You know, it's the principal, when you start giving money away for things that are not necessarily required, the downfall of true republics is hurried. They all fail, the question is, can you cheat history and have them live longer?

Chapter 04 - 3:38

Civil Disobedience

John Erling: From 1970 to '78 you served as manufacturing manager in the family business.

Tom Coburn: In one region of that family business, yeah.

JE: Talk to us about that. I believe you grew that company and did you enjoy that work?

TC: Yeah, we had a fun time. We started a little facility out in Virginia where we knew we could probably find skilled employees that were in that industry.

My dad's business was making machines and we decided to vertically integrate to make lenses. We started that and had about a 50 million dollar business when I left. Which was a good business, it was a growing business. But that industry has so been taken over by the Italians and the Japanese. There's not an American owned company left.

That just shows you another incidence where the federal government has failed, because you go buy a pair of frames today, it's all price-fixed because one company owns 80 percent of the frame production in this country. And none of it is produced in this country.

JE: So you were in at the right time and got out at the right time?

TC: Oh, yeah, and it was great. We had a ball. I built a great team. I was inspected by the US Department of Justice because I wouldn't fill out their discrimination forms. Because I knew I wasn't discriminating. So they came down and said, "You have to fill out."

I said, "No, I don't. Go out and check. Come inspect me but I'm not filling out your form." And, of course, I had a black systems manager, I had all sorts of women supervisors, I had an African American department manager. You know, I had immigrants, I had the whole kit and caboodle and there wasn't any discrimination anywhere.

And they said, "You still have to fill out the forms."

I said, "Take me to court, I'm not filling out the form." Never heard from them again.

JE: Could that be possible seeds planted?

TC: You know, one of the things that I've noticed that's changed during my life, in terms of Americans dealing with federal government, it is now assumed that you are guilty and you have to prove yourself innocent. Whereas in the past, our freedom was based on that we're innocent until we're proven guilty. You compete against the most powerful set of attorneys in the world, with unlimited resources.

There's a great book out by Charles Murray called *By the People*. His whole theme in that book is if you want a handle on what's going on with the federal government today, just do universal civil disobedience because they don't have enough attorneys to sue us all.

JE: [laughing]

TC: It's really a pretty good idea. Just quit following the stupid rules.

Now there's another book out that says the average American, no matter who they are, breaks three federal laws every day.

JE: [laughing]

TC: So...

JE: But it was pretty gutsy for you to not fill that form out. Weren't you afraid that something would happen, maybe to the business that would be penalizing?

TC: No because I thought right's right. I just stood on the basis that we don't discriminate. We don't count how many African American, we don't count. And, of course, that's their buzzword. "Well, if you don't count, you obviously don't have any. You're obviously discriminating."

And I said, "Come on down. You're welcome here with open arms." So never heard from them again, never filled out one of their forms again. Never filled out a census or a Department of Commerce form in my medical practice either. Refused to.

JE: Why did you refuse that?

TC: It's none of their damn business. I mean, the census is so out of control in this country, and costs so much money. We don't do it online like most countries do. We could do it so much faster, so much quicker. And if you want information about industry, pay a private firm to go get it. At least they'll have an incentive to do it, rather than you have to do this, the federal government says you have to. No you don't. They just do that to intimidate you.

Chapter 05 - 4:47**Medical School**

John Erling: In telling your story here, I guess while you were working for the company, malignant melanoma occurred.

Tom Coburn: Yeah.

JE: Tell us about that. And your first feelings of how you discovered it.

TC: My mother noticed something. I came home for Christmas, we came home about twice a year to Oklahoma. She said, "That's changed, get it checked out, will you?"

So I did.

JE: She noticed a spot or something?

TC: Yeah. So I did and the doc said, "Oh, I don't think it's anything. We'll do a biopsy of it." He calls me back, and says, "No, it's a melanoma."

Then I ended up having pretty radical surgery. I had a two-stage surgery where they took it off. The lymph node below it were positive and then I did what's called a radical neck dissection, where they take the muscles out of your neck and the veins and the nerves and they just kind of clean everything out on that side. Fortunate enough that I had a great surgeon and I was cured.

JE: But the shock of knowing you had that...?

TC: Well, I wasn't smart enough to know how serious it was, plus I was too focused on my business. And this was just a little interruption, let's just keep going

JE: You say that kind of lightly, wasn't it frightening, the word cancer?

TC: Yeah but, you know, everything is frightening if you let it be, John. There's a great Scripture, "Consider it all joy when you encounter trials. Trials produce endurance and endurance perfects your faith." And it's really true. So that's just one of the trials along life's line. And sometimes you don't live through them and sometimes you do. And what you're supposed to do is learn from them.

JE: Yeah. Somewhere along the line then you decided to pursue a medical degree.

TC: Well, I got interested in medicine because we started doing the research on the first intraocular lenses. We started with some doctors in New York, and I started scrubbing with them on monkeys and doing some scrubbing with some humans on some INDs. We actually had the first INDs for intraocular lenses in this country. Investigational New Drug device.

When I left to go to medical school I was going to be an ophthalmologist. And now I can't think of anything more boring to be than an ophthalmologist.

JE: You graduated from the University of Oklahoma Medical School.

TC: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: In 1983.

TC: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: With honors, and then what do you do?

TC: I did a general internship in general surgery at St. Anthony's Hospital. And then went from there to the University of Arkansas to do a family medicine residency, because I was thinking about doing some mission field work and I wanted the surgery skills. At least the basic surgery skills. And, boy, that was probably my best medical training experience. The year of thirty-six on, twelve on. Thirty-six on, twelve off. It was great, I learned so much.

JE: Thirty-six hours on, how do people, I mean, you slept, you had time to get away but you were on call for thirty-six hours.

TC: Yeah, but you got a little nap in there. But what it does is it trains you to focus your brain when you have to. And in medicine when you're tired or sick but you're still working, you have to focus. You know, it really causes you to focus. You put all this other stuff back. You're tired, you're sick, you're not feeling well, and you say, "I've got to focus."

As a side, I got one of my chemo treatments Monday. Last Monday. And I took off the next day and did a three-day deal where I gave testimony in Washington, did a deal on precision oncology. I did that so I would not be thinking about how crappy I felt from the medicine.

Then I crashed on Friday, Saturday, and Sunday. Monday was much better, so was Tuesday.

Anyhow, it's a philosophy of the mind. You actually can control those things if you want to focus.

You know, I think it's one of the worst mistakes they've done in graduate medicine is limit the amount of time these young doctors can have. Because the more you see, the more you know. And the less you see, the more mistakes you're going to make.

Now we've decided we didn't increase the length of the residencies but we markedly decreased the amount of training they got in the residencies.

JE: Is there a time though that the body just gets tired and the brain gets tired and maybe you're not making the right decisions?

TC: I'm sure that happens and I'm sure that's a variable with some people. But let me tell you something, if we were to have a major event, wouldn't you want somebody trained to learn to focus? If the doctors were going to have to work for the next twelve days because we have a massive earthquake in Tulsa, wouldn't you want them trained to focus?

JE: Right.

TC: That's the whole answer to everything in our society. Everybody always says, "Well, what if this happens?" Well, what if it does? Is the betterment of the whole worth the risk of something bad happening? Because something always bad is going to happen.

My philosophy is, "Let's do the best we can even if there are some down sides."

Chapter 06 - 4:14**A Major Decision**

John Erling: The open family practice in Muskogee—

Tom Coburn: With two wonderful old GPs, they were great. They were great. They taught me a time or two.

JE: In Muskogee?

TC: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: You decided to live there because that's where—

TC: That was where I was from.

JE: Then you started delivering thousands and thousands of babies.

TC: Well, I just had fun. You know, medicine is two things: It's fun and it's terrible. And when you're obstetrics, most of the time, it's fun. When it's terrible, it's absolutely terrible.

JE: What's terrible?

TC: Well, losing the baby or having a baby with a severe deformity or having a very sick mother, you know, with major complications in her pregnancy. Those are terrible, but most of the times, out comes this new set of genes that squawks and is going to be squawking the whole rest of their life with a different attitude that's ever been here before. You know, it's a whole new creation and it's just fun to see that.

The most fun I had was babies I delivered. Because I was doing that before the Senate made me stop delivering babies.

JE: We'll talk about that. I believe you were members then at First Baptist Church in Muskogee?

TC: Uh-huh (affirmative).

JE: You taught Sunday school and active and obviously a strong faith. So you're this doctor in Muskogee. You're having fun, the ups and downs of delivering babies, what, about four thousand babies?

TC: Total, yeah.

JE: And something happened to get you to think about running for elected office. Is it true that you are reading about Mike Synar, talking about nationalizing healthcare? And you had an epiphany experience.

TC: Well, no, I knew Mike. Mike and I were high school buddies. No, my epiphany was when he voted one way and then sent information to the voters that he voted a different way. That's when I had an epiphany that somebody besides politicians ought to be getting into this. And I still feel that way.

You know, I don't care if they're Republican or Democrat, I think we got some terrible long-term Republican politicians in Oklahoma, because it's got to be about us and not them. Too often that's not the case. And when it's not the case we all lose, including them. They just don't realize it.

So I just said, “Somebody besides some of these that play the game of politics ought to get in here and mix thing up a little bit.” So I did.

JE: But what happened when you came home and told Carolyn you were thinking about running?

TC: She wasn’t happy about that at all. Said, “You’re nuts, you’re doing what you want to do. Why would you go and ruin a great medical career?”

And that’s because I thought I was supposed to. I’ve always made decisions based on what I think I’m supposed to do. Now it’s not necessarily what I want to do, it’s what is right for Tom Coburn at this time? Where can I have an influence? Where can I make a difference?

JE: Didn’t she even question your personality that you didn’t have the right kind of personality?

TC: Oh, yeah.

JE: You’re too blunt, and too—

TC: Oh, yeah, yeah, exactly our problem today. People aren’t blunt enough, they’re not telling the truth.

JE: So you told others then, maybe of your next circle of friends, and they probably had to say, “You’re crazy.”

TC: “You’re crazy,” yeah, they did.

JE: So when does Tom find some support as he goes further out?

TC: Oh, you know, when my friends said, “Hey, he’s serious, he’s going to do this.” So I did and I got into it late and there were already two really good guys in that Second District race. But I had a great connection because I delivered all these babies. And when you deliver a lot of babies, God does the work and you look like a hero. All of a sudden, the family thinks you’re something. That’s a little bit of an advantage when it comes into politics and getting people to at least listen to you.

JE: Well, you believe that career politicians had been doing business as usual for man years and you saw yourself as an outsider—

TC: Yeah.

JE: ... coming in. Did you really think that you could change the culture in Washington?

TC: Well, I didn’t know, I just thought not trying, not trying, what that does is doom you. So I gave it a shot for six years.

Chapter 07 - 3:05

Not One of Them

John Erling: The outsider, that happened in 1994 that you ran.

Tom Coburn: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: Today we are in 2016 in the midst of presidential primary.

TC: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: And right now Donald Trump, businessman, is the presumptive nominee.

TC: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: Senator Ted Cruz dropped out last night. And Donald Trump is receiving outsider support. He's never held an elective office, vastly different from the normal politician in his style and his disregard for the Republican party. And he has supporters who do not like the way Washington is doing business. There's a similar thing going on here that you had in your mind that he has and what's happened to him. Talk about that.

TC: I haven't thought about it a lot. I don't doubt that he desires to restore us back on track, that he sees the track that we're off of. But I think the similarities are really different. I think Donald Trump brings out the worst in people, not the best. I think he's more about the vision than reconciliation. Our country is sick and you're not going to heal it, either party isn't going to heal it by worsening the alienation. What you have to do is be a problem-solver.

So, you know, it remains to be seen whether somebody of his position can win a national election by the personality that he's displayed thus far. The other thing is, he's given no answers to anything. I understand fully why Americans are voting for him and here's why it is: He's not one of them. That's how upset Americans are with the politics of this country today. And I was in twenty-one states last year, I can tell you, and every state is exactly the same, we're sick of them.

JE: Them, meaning he's not one of them? He's not one of the politicians?

TC: He's not a career politician in Washington not doing their job, breaking their promises every day to what they told the people that elected them that they would do. So he's getting the votes—in spite of, you know, people cringe when he says some of these things, but he still gets their vote, because he's not one of them. I understand that completely.

JE: In '94, a University of Michigan post said only 21 percent of the respondents said they trusted the government to do the right things most of the time. In '99, a study showed that 75 percent of the public believe the government represents a few big interest. Only 19 percent believe the government is concerned with the benefit of all the people. That was in '94, the same could be said for today.

TC: Oh, it's less than that. I think the latest research is like 5 or 6 percent. Well-earned too.

I just gave testimony on a bill that I got passed, forced the GAO to list the duplication in the federal government every year. This is the sixth year; there's over 400 billion dollars in total that's been identified. In the six years they've eliminated 36 billion, they estimate they might eliminate the other 60 billion over the next four years, but that means the net, 90 billion dollars continue to be wasted every year. So there's a real simple question: Why aren't you doing something about it?"

Chapter 08 - 8:43**First Campaign**

John Erling: Let me just take you through your first campaign. Mike Synar was an eight-term incumbent, a Democratic. But he was defeated in the run-off of the Democratic nomination—

Tom Coburn: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: ... by a retired principal by the name of Virgil Cooper.

TC: Great man. His son went to work for me when I went to Congress.

JE: He had spent twenty thousand dollars, but then he had help because the NRA, tobacco companies, and cattlemen were all opposed to Synar. So you came in, had a perfect storm. It was a narrow victory for Virgil by just over two thousand votes. Why was Synar defeated?

TC: Because he wasn't trusted.

JE: Wasn't trusted. Had been for eight terms.

TC: Yeah, for sixteen years he'd been up there. But his votes certainly didn't represent the constituency that he represented, one. And he wasn't necessarily straightforward about how he voted when he communicated with his district.

JE: And would have skewed more and more liberal?

TC: Yeah.

JE: For the district?

TC: Oh, yeah, he's far, far, far too liberal for the Second District. The Second District was really an old conservative Democrat district. It would still be that way today if the Democratic party hadn't changed. If it were the same, you wouldn't have any Republicans in Oklahoma. You'd have conservative Democrats.

JE: Mike died January 19, 1996. He died of a brain tumor, he was just forty-five. He was twenty-eight when he defeated incumbent Ted Risenhoover—

TC: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: ...who'd gone to Washington and seemed to live a Hollywood lifestyle while he was there.

TC: Sure did, I remember the stories.

JE: The swimming pools and all that.

TC: The beds and—

JE: Right. But in the campaign, you and Virgil were in agreement and that was to defeat Mike Synar. Right?

TC: Yeah, all my ads were aimed at Mike Synar.

JE: You never talked about Virgil at all. Did you have a tough time running against Virgil?

TC: There wasn't anything bad to say, I mean, the only time my wife even got upset the whole time is he said we were supporting Beer Frederick because she owned, I think, a hundred

shares in a mutual fund that had two-tenths of one hundredths of 1 percent ownership in Anheuser Busch or something. Actually, I went by and saw him several times; went to his funeral when he died. A very amiable relationship.

JE: Did you enjoy the campaign?

TC: No.

JE: Were you energized? You didn't like it?

TC: I don't like campaigns. You know, what I like is town hall meetings where we actually get down and talk about what's going on and what people think and where they're from. You know, if you let Americans breathe then if they get to breathe and then they see some response to that breathe, you won't have troubles. If you don't let Americans breathe, or you let them breathe and you don't do any response to their breathing, we're going to follow history.

JE: Did you ever question your decision to run in that campaign? Did you ever say, "Well, maybe I shouldn't have done this?" When you say, "I've decided what's right for Tom," are you always certain about that?

TC: Yeah, pretty much so. I mean, financially it was hardship all the time. My net assets went down every year I was ever in public office. Because my earning power, you know, reverses my lifestyle and my debt but just never worked. I have never figured out how all the politicians tend to increase their net worth while they're in office. I'm obviously not dubious enough to figure that out.

JE: Nineteen ninety-four was an interesting year because it brought in many like you—

TC: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: The Contract for America, tell us about the Contract for America, what that was.

TC: Well, just specific things that Congress said they'd do or eliminate that most of the Americans agreed with. They put it out as a campaign platform and they did 95 percent of it in the first hundred days in Congress.

JE: This was the first time Republicans were in power in over forty years.

TC: Yeah.

JE: So you came in at the perfect, perfect time. You were ending the era in American politics, bringing in another, and you wanted to stop large government, start an era of less government. So how did that work?

TC: Not well. Um (hesitation sound), the real difference between politicians and people who want to serve is politicians, what they're looking at is the next race and what does it take to win the next race? And the leadership that we had didn't really want to solve those problems. What they wanted to do was make sure they won the next race.

So their focus is over here when their focus needed to be here. My political philosophy is if you tell people you're going to do something and do it, and you develop trust, they'll re-elect you all the time. It's a matter of trust.

The political machines up there think it's about money, numbers, etc. And some of it is, but most of it is how do you get people to trust you?

JE: The Speaker of the House was Newt Gingrich.

TC: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: You took issue with the speaker and when you do that that's a big thing to do, isn't it?

TC: Well, it is historically, but, you know, one-on-one it's not. When somebody makes a commitment to you, when somebody says they're going to do something and then they don't do it, that doesn't take me long to learn that lesson. And that was true with the thirteen of us that said, "Hey, you're out."

So even though we didn't win the vote to vacate the chair, after the next election, he was out. He'd lost the confidence. We came to actually fix things, we didn't come to set up a dynasty that would be in power. We didn't care who was in power—what we wanted was things fixed.

It was a great big opportunity missed. When the Speaker of the House is crying about getting off the back door of an airplane, you know, he shouldn't be Speaker of the House.

JE: All right, to show how it works in Washington, in '95, you had voted to decrease committee spending by a third. First of all, what is committee spending?

TC: Well, each committee has a budget. In the Senate my last year, I was the ranking member of the Homeland Security Government Affairs. I think I had like a three and a half million dollar budget. And, of course, I didn't come close to spending any of that.

JE: You wouldn't have needed—

TC: Half of it, max. In my own office budget, I sent back five to six hundred thousand dollars every year. Because they give you way too much money. Either they give you way too much money or the people there don't know how to spend money, one or the other. I would have bet it's both. So we voted to reduce committee spending.

JE: But then two years later, leadership decided—

TC: They—

JE: ... to increase committee spending by 15 percent.

TC: Yeah.

JE: Several members of your class threatened to vote against the bill.

TC: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: So that's when you had a confrontation with Newt Gingrich.

TC: Right.

JE: How did that go?

TC: Well, it all started, you know, this all started in the first hundred days we were there, because we had all these points of the contract, and all of a sudden, it was said by leadership, "Well, maybe we don't need to vote on term limits. Since we're in charge now, maybe we don't need to vote on term limits."

So they rigged the vote so everybody got to vote on term limits but they knew not one of those would get a majority. And then I knew the game was up, I said, "Here it is, here's the slimy part of politics." So no longer did I trust them.

Then when they reneged on their committee stuff, you know what the renege on the committee stuff was? It was to have extra money to spend against Clinton. That's what it was all about, it was all political, it didn't have anything to do with the needs of Congress, because that wasn't going to be divided among every committee, it was going to be divided into one committee, that 15 percent, which was going to be doubling or tripling. So you could investigate Clinton.

JE: The sexual charges and—

TC: Yeah.

JE: ... then ultimately impeachment.

TC: Yeah. Again, it's slight of hand. The truth isn't what the truth is. And you can't trust what's coming out of Washington. I mean, you just can't trust it. You can't trust the budget numbers, you can't trust OMB, you can't trust CBO, you can trust GAO and IGs. Most of the time you can trust the IGs. But there's not many people you can trust.

And the other thing is, we have this menagerie that is gigantic that nobody's in control of. Nobody's in control, it's on autopilot to spend our kids' future and nobody's doing anything about it.

JE: Nor will they.

TC: Well, they can.

JE: But will they?

TC: Well, it doesn't look like this cycle.

JE: But it takes more than apparently—

TC: No, it takes...

JE: ...thirteen who came to Congress.

TC: No, it takes a leadership, and it takes a President that says, "Look, we have some real problems coming up. Why don't we do something about them now?" Painful? Yes. For all of us? Yes. Could we do something? Yes. Why don't we?

Chapter 09 - 5:09

Not to Worry about Re-election

John Erling: What kind of pressure would a speaker put on you and others when we're going to vote against this? And he says, maybe threatening, "We can do this back to you."

Tom Coburn: Well, they did that once to a member of Congress from Wisconsin on the Defense Appropriations Bill, and he didn't vote for it. He's a Republican on a Republican Defense Appropriation.

Bob Livingston said, "I want him thrown off," so they threw him off and then all the first men said, "No, you put him back on," so they put him back on.

JE: That's because you had numbers.

TC: We had numbers.

JE: Right.

TC: But they can only put pressure on you if you want to be there. If you don't care about being there, they have no pressure on you whatsoever.

JE: If you're not worried about your next election?

TC: Yeah. If you don't care, if you're there to do the right thing and you're doing it because you really are altruistic and want to do the right thing, there's nothing they can do to you. And that drives them nuts. Because most of the people there want to climb the next ladder. They want to go to the inner ring. They want to be there where all the big decisions are made so they can say, "Hey, look at me. I'm in the no."

JE: Well, if they sense that you don't care about your next election then there is no way they can say, "Well, we're going to withhold support or we're not going to campaign for you," or anything. You call their bluff.

TC: You call their bluff but you also build a great backing at home because you're standing up to the corruption that everybody knows is there.

JE: Did you have one-on-one standoffs with Newt Gingrich?

TC: Oh, yeah, all the time.

JE: Alone in a room?

TC: All the time, all the time. Smart guy, smart guy, he could have done so much for this country. But he's like all of us, we're all human, and when ego gets in the way, man, you trip over your lip.

JE: When you would catch him in an outright lie, probably—

TC: Oh, yeah, I'd question him on it.

JE: How could he defend—

TC: Oh, he'd weasel and he'd say, "Well, that's not what I meant. That's not what I—"

I said, "But that is what you meant."

He said, "Well, that isn't what I—"

You know, and so they're not going to come clean. They don't have the courage to come clean.

The only one that I ever saw that was Chris Cox from California had the courage to come clean. He said, "You're right, I didn't keep my word."

- JE:** Was this disillusioning then? I mean, here you guys came in and you were going to do something?
- TC:** Yeah, it was pretty disillusioning, the team we came in to fight for wasn't the team that we were seeing.
- JE:** So then Newt Gingrich is out, he's gone, he's history.
- TC:** Yeah.
- JE:** And started with your gang of thirteen, I guess, right?
- TC:** Um-hmm (affirmative),
- JE:** And then Denny Hastert becomes the new Speaker of the House. Right?
- TC:** He was kind of a puppet of Tom DeLay's.
- JE:** Tom DeLay, the congressman from Texas.
- TC:** Now the whip, the majority whip, who then became the majority leader. Hastert became speaker because Tom DeLay's machine got behind him.
- JE:** How are you about Dennis Hastert becoming the speaker? Did that—
- TC:** Well, I, you know, I was kind of agnostic.
- JE:** You didn't care? Did you have issues with him?
- TC:** No, I had issues with the one that was getting ready to be speaker, which was Livingston.
- JE:** Bob Livingston.
- TC:** Yeah, I mean, you can't say you're this great guy and at the same time screwing your assistant. Maybe that's the culture that used to be there, but it wasn't the culture that I was going to experience.
- JE:** And then we realize that these people are human.
- TC:** No, Hastert, that's such a—
- JE:** Is an admitted serial child molester.
- TC:** Yeah.
- JE:** This had to be as big a shock to you as anybody.
- TC:** Oh, yeah.
- JE:** And it happened back in his coaching days.
- TC:** Yeah, thirty years before.
- JE:** Right. And here he was the essence of what we think was right and a good man.
- TC:** Well, you thought, but you didn't know.
- JE:** Yeah.
- TC:** Now look, we're all fallen, every one of us has screwed up. Every one of us is far from perfect. But not everybody makes those mistakes. And what we have to focus on is that you see all this aberration out there, but that's not the norm. It's not the norm. So we have to go back and focus, "Here's the greatness, here's the goodness, here's the things we can appreciate. Let's focus on them." And pity and be sad for when we're away from that norm.

JE: We should say that Steve Largent, who represented the First District, Seattle Seahawks football player, ran for governor. You and Steve worked fairly close together, did you, when you were there? And he was along on what we talked about.

TC: Good friends. We rode up to Washington every week together on the airplane and close spiritually and in our faith. He was a great leader and wasn't going to back down from wrong things. Just overall a great man.

You know, I left and then he later decided he wanted to run for governor and I was highly supportive of that. I was back in practice at that time.

JE: You were out of politics then for about three years?

TC: Yeah, I wished it was more than that but—[both laughing]

JE: You got me there. All right, let me regain my composure here.

Chapter 10 - 4:50

Senate

John Erling: Okay, you left, you were unhappy with the way things were done in Washington.

Tom Coburn: Well, I left because I had made a commitment that I wouldn't serve more than three terms.

JE: But you were glad you were leaving?

TC: Oh, yeah, yeah, I was glad.

JE: So then what made you want to get back in again?

TC: Oh, I didn't want to, I got talked into it.

JE: How—

TC: I ran for the wrong reasons.

JE: Talked into it by?

TC: Oh, by a lot of people that wanted me to run. And again, I said, "No, no, no," and then I started really considering it spiritually and prayerfully, then decided to do it. Then got in late, as you remember, late in March for a primary in July and a general election in November.

JE: Let me detail some of that. And it was one of those perfect times because four-term incumbent Republican Don Nickles was not running.

TC: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: He wouldn't have run if he was going to run again.

TC: No, I actually called him and said, "Please run again."

JE: [laughing] Right. So I don't have to.

- TC:** But I ran because I didn't the person on the other side would represent the values of Oklahoma, and I was right.
- JE:** You were fighting an uphill battle because Kirk Humphreys, former Oklahoma City mayor, was running. He was the favorite of the state and national Republican establishment.
- TC:** Yeah, he was a good guy, good guy.
- JE:** And corporation commissioner Bob Anthony also running was a state name.
- TC:** Um-hmm, um-hmm (affirmatives).
- JE:** Yet you won by a large margin, 61 percent of the vote to Humphreys' 25 percent. That was in the primary. It baffled a lot of people, I would imagine, certainly Mr. Humphreys. Why do you think you were able to win and by that margin?
- TC:** One is I kept my word on my term limits, which is unusual for a politician to keep their word. So I built trust, especially in the First and Second District. They trusted me to be a man of my word. And I think the second thing is they wanted to make sure they kept the seat. Common old Republicans. And they had a formidable challenger in Brad Carson. How do you beat him?
- JE:** If Humphreys was supported by the state national Republican party, didn't you think, *I am fighting against my own party?*
- TC:** No.
- JE:** No?
- TC:** No.
- JE:** He was their favorite boy.
- TC:** That's okay, I got into it late. You know, people get to support whoever they want to support, I don't care. The fact is, I'm going to run. If I can't convince them to vote for me, I won't win, if I can, I will. He had the money, he had the support, he had the senatorial committee backing, he had everything that you need to win. And I understand that. But that doesn't mean that I wasn't supposed to run. I ran because I thought I was supposed to.
- JE:** Then in the general election, you did face Brad Carson, who had represented the Second District.
- TC:** Took my place.
- JE:** And in that election, you won by a margin of 53 percent to Carson's 42 percent. What was the main issue? What do you think tilted it in your favor?
- TC:** Oh, it just became such a negative campaign. Again, I think the knowledge of my past behavior. A lot of things, like people pretty well knew I wasn't running to become a US senator, I was running to try to fix problems. You know, the title wasn't what I was after, and a career wasn't what I was after. And you could see, I mean, there's nothing wrong with a career in public service. What's wrong with a career in public service is when it directs what you do, which is different than what we need done. That's what's wrong with a career in public service.

And very few people have the moral strength to both recognize the difference and then stand, even when it's to their own personal political career's harm.

JE: Then you were re-elected in 2010.

TC: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: You originally planned not to seek a third term. Do you—

TC: Oh, I wasn't ever planning on seeking a third term. That would have had—

JE: Because you had a self-imposed two-term limit.

TC: Yeah, I wasn't ever planning on that.

JE: You never were planning on that?

TC: huh-uh (negative).

JE: Okay. That would have been unlike you then to go against your word on that.

TC: Oh, I wouldn't have done it. Matter of fact, I told the leader of the Republicans in 2012 that I would be gone by 2014. I mean, I told them that long before I knew I got sick again. So he knew that he was going to have a two-year election that he's going to have to raise the funds for.

JE: Okay, because then in January 2014, you announced that you would resign because of your health.

TC: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: But you knew that two years—

TC: Yeah, but I resigned because I came to the conclusion you can't fix it there.

JE: But it was your health too that threw you out.

TC: No, it wasn't why I resigned.

JE: Really?

TC: I had planned on resigning. I mean, that's the story and that's fine, I can't change that. But I had given notice to the leader that I was leaving in 2014 because I couldn't take it up here anymore. I couldn't take the duplicity, I couldn't take the lack of agreement, I couldn't take the lack of honesty, and I couldn't take the lack of leadership, including his.

So he knew that I was leaving.

Chapter 11 - 4:25

Cancer

Tom Coburn: Then I found out I had cancer.

John Erling: It was in 2013 you announced you had been diagnosed with prostate cancer.

TC: Right.

JE: But in 2011 you had prostate cancer surgery.

TC: Yeah, I just had a recurrence of the disease.

JE: You survived also colon cancer.

TC: um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: And as we've talked about, melanoma.

TC: Right.

JE: Today as you sit here and you refer to it you're in treatment now.

TC: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: With chemotherapy.

TC: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: For your prostate cancer.

TC: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: How do you cope with this battle? And it's not the first time, it's four times, I guess. How do you deal with that?

TC: Well, it's just I'm on a journey. There's ups and downs. I think you cope, I think you can learn something from every adversity in your life. How to cope with it, how to treat others when you don't feel well. How to get up and do something that other people wouldn't do at the same time. I think it strengthens your character to have lots of adversity. It hardens you, and I'm not talking about in an abusive way. It hardens your ability to take adversity in the future.

JE: You're very busy today and I want to talk about that, but that helps you divert your attention.

TC: Sure.

JE: So that you're not thinking about this all the time.

TC: You bet, that's why I got on an airplane last Tuesday and went and worked for three days because I knew if I was sitting at home I'd be thinking, and I'd feel the pain, and I'd feel the nausea and I'd get up and throw up. And by doing other things I'm not doing that.

JE: So right now where are you on this treatment? Are you nearing the end of the chemo?

TC: Yeah, I have three more and this is the last set of chemo I'll get. I'm out of drugs but I don't have any evidence of disease right now and I haven't for over a year. So this is kind of MD Anderson's way of, "Maybe we can beat this thing from coming back."

You know, oncologists are a sweet bunch of guys and gals but they beat the heck out of you.

JE: [laughing]

TC: They don't take these medicines, we do.

JE: [laughing] Right, but it's working for you.

TC: It's worked but I don't know how many other cancers they've caused, you know, with the chemotherapy. Plus the third time getting chemotherapy my bone marrow is shot. It doesn't come back well.

JE: Did your faith help you through this?

TC: Oh, yeah, everything that I've done my faith has helped. I want to say this so that it comes off right: I cannot imagine living the life I've lived without having faith.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

TC: Couldn't have done it. So the positive attributes plus the real spiritual help, which, you know, I think there's six senses, okay? There's taste, touch, smell, hearing, and sight. And then there's a spiritual sixth sense. It's real, it's powerful, insightful, great for making decisions, great for causing you to pause. One of my big problems is not pausing. That's the tool that I use on my journey.

So I know where I'm going. The question is, how many other hills does he want me to climb before I get there. And a lot of other people are on the same journeys.

JE: Do you ever say, "Why me?"

TC: No.

JE: So every one of your adversities has just made you stronger, is the way you see it?

TC: Well, it's made me stronger but it also has made me give so much more appreciation to the things that I didn't value before.

JE: Yeah.

TC: The small things.

JE: Yeah. You're very public about it. Do people reach out, send letters, or do they talk to you about it when you see them?

TC: Oh, yeah. It's just like I ask people who have lost a child, I said, "What are you thinking about Donna today?" Because most people won't ever say anything to them and they want to talk about their kids they've lost. So, yeah, I'm happy to talk about it. You know, I get a little tired of it after twenty questions, but I'm public about it. If I can help somebody else go through this, I want to.

JE: And I'm sure you have.

TC: Well, hopefully.

JE: Given that kind of support.

TC: Yeah.

JE: Your colleagues, have they reached out to you? Would they—

TC: Oh, yeah, yeah, I've got a lot. You know, the best thing about being a congressman and a senator has nothing to do with being a congressman and a senator, it has to do about relationships. And formed some great lifelong relationships with some very fine people. None of which are career politicians.

Chapter 12 – 6:12
President Obama

John Erling: President Obama is one of those that you created a friendship with.

Tom Coburn: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: And everybody is saying, “Well, how can that be? You’re a Republican, he’s a Democrat. How can you be friends? How did your friendship begin with the President?”

TC: Well, we went into the Senate at the same time and they have an orientation class. I sat down next to him on a bus and started carrying out a conversation, wanting to get to know him. And started to getting part of his life story and became friends. And when we were in the Senate we decided we’d try to do some things together by partisan and we did.

A real funny story, I was in Washington three weeks ago, four weeks ago, and I’d just gotten a treatment and was going into the White House. I’m getting IV radiation now. And all of a sudden, the bells and whistles go off and I’m surrounded.

“Are you carrying a bomb?”

“Well, no.”

“Did you have a thallium stress test recently?”

I said, “No.”

“Back up against the wall.”

I said, “But I did have Radium 223.”

And said, “Well, wait right here.”

And, of course, a guy comes up with one of these—you know, only that the government has. “Yeah, you had Radium 223 forty-eight hours and fifty-six minutes ago.”

I said, “You’re right.”

He said, “Well, you can go now.”

You know, it’s pretty interesting that they can measure all that small amount of radioactivity.

JE: And why were you going there?

TC: I was meeting with the Vice President on the cancer cures, moonshine cures. He’d asked me to come by.

JE: Vice President Joe Biden.

TC: Uh-huh (affirmative).

JE: That’s a serious issue for him.

TC: Yeah, and I was really impressed. He’s got a great staff, they’re doing it and I’m working hard on research with Manhattan Institute trying to move. We could cure cancer, or at least we could make cancer a chronic disease where very few people die from it if we just had a modern regulatory scheme and collaboration between the great scientists at the universities and the drug companies and FDA.

Our problem is no leadership, no management. And Joe's got it, they've given him the power to make some changes. So my hope is that we'll get some of that done before he leaves.

JE: Back to the President, what's his personality? Everybody says he's a loner and doesn't like to fraternize a lot. Is that true?

TC: I think he's shy. And I think he's timid and I think there's two Barak Obamas, the one at home around his kids and his wife and his close friends. You know, he kids around with me and we joke around.

While I was there he heard I was in the White House, made me come down and see him. So I went and visited with him.

JE: In the Oval Office?

TC: Uh-huh (affirmative), and he told me about the plans for the kids after they leave and what they were going to do. I had a fifteen, twenty minute visit with him. There's times he's been mad at me, I got it, but, you know, "Sometimes you're not right, Mr. President, sometimes I'm not right." It's okay to be mad, but you still reconcile, so we're reconciled and I think the world of him as a man. I don't agree hardly any of his politics but he's a great human being.

JE: You said he's shy, do you think that worked against him then? Because we always think of a Joe Biden or others getting to walk around, shake hands, grab people by the lapels and try to coerce and all that. And that worked against him, do you think?

TC: Oh, I don't think it worked against him. What happened to his administration is he got super majorities in both Houses, he could do whatever he wants. And once you can't do that anymore, you didn't negotiate any of those two years. So now you don't feel like you have to negotiate and you to try to rule like a king. That's what happened.

That was the worst thing that ever happened for them to get super majorities in both Houses.

JE: Because?

TC: Because they chose not to negotiate, it was just our way or the highway. And then as soon as you lose that it's not your way or the highway.

JE: And now the Republicans are saying it's our way or the highway.

TC: No, I don't think so. They don't have the presidency. I mean, if they had the presidency they could say that. But they don't have super majority either. So the big difference, they don't have sixty in the Senate and they don't have two-thirds in the House. But it's leadership. How do you make everybody look good and do what's right for the country?

JE: Right.

TC: That's what you do.

JE: Don't we long for the days, they say, back in the '60s and all, when politicians could disagree but yet get together socially—

TC: That's a farce. First of all, they still do it. They have dinner together, across the table, lots, every night. Are they out chasing women together anymore? No. But that's a media fiction. There's lots of great relationships.

I had dinner while I was there with Joe Mansion and Angus King. For goodness sakes, and we'd had dinner a lot.

JE: He—

TC: And Mike Doyle the congressman and Bart Stupak, it's just not—

JE: These are all Democrats and then there was an Independent.

TC: Yeah, I think Angus King.

JE: I think Angus King is an—

TC: But he sides with the Democrats and their offices.

JE: Right. And so you can have something in common with them?

TC: Sure.

JE: They're all upset with Congress.

TC: Well, now the fact is they're all people. And what we want is we want the people leading us to lead. Take chances, give us a vision.

Our problem in our country, we don't have a leader out there giving us a vision of what it could be. It's all what it is, how bad it is. What could it be? Where's the vision? How do we get there? How do all of us get there? We don't have that, you don't see it.

JE: So a Donald Trump, who today says, "I'm going to go in and I'm going to change this and change this and change this." Does he have any ghost of a chance to do that?

TC: Well, first of all, he can't do it by himself so he's got to have a relationship with Congress. Depends on what the election says the Congress is.

JE: And he says he wants a Vice President who can do just that.

TC: Huh! He wants a Vice President that can negotiate with Congress?

JE: Right. He wants a politician.

TC: Uh-huh (affirmative).

JE: That's what he says.

TC: Well, I don't know. My personal bias is that maybe what he says is absolutely true, but I don't want to buy from a carnival barker, I want to see what's behind the curtain. So tell me if you want to do this, how you're going to do it. And I'll come help you. But if you can't tell me how you're going to do it, you're just bloviating, then you're not any different than anybody else that's been there.

Chapter 13 - 4:07**War in Iraq**

John Erling: Let me come back to this, the war in Iraq, you were against that war from the very beginning.

Tom Coburn: Well, I wasn't there when they voted on it, but I voted against the funding for it every time.

JE: And was it a mistake—

TC: Yes.

JE: ... to go into Iraq.

TC: Yes, in my opinion.

JE: George W. Bush brought us into that war.

TC: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: What did you think of him as a President?

TC: I loved him, I loved him. All Presidents make mistakes. He did great in Afghanistan, and he did great with us after 9/11 as a country and leading us. He did a lot of great things. He did a lot of lousy things. He got us Medicare Part D. That's only a 13 trillion dollar bill to your kids. That was all political, that wasn't about getting seniors drugs, that was about winning the next election. That's a Carl Rowe deal.

So when you will do things like that, that's harmful to the country in the long run, because what you're doing is you're playing with the future of our country and you're promising somebody a benefit that you don't have any way that you're going to pay for it.

JE: You were known for speaking out against excessive spending, the bridge to nowhere. You irritated many of your colleagues—

TC: Sure.

JE: ... to kind of fight with Senator Ted Stevens from Alaska, 456 million dollars, I think, in there, and wanted to fix the aftermath of the Katrina storm.

TC: Yeah, the Pontchartrain Bridge was down. Shouldn't we spend that money there? That was the amendment: take the money from Alaska and put it in Louisiana to rebuild the Pontchartrain Bridge. And, of course, I got beat on that rather significantly, like I did most things.

JE: Did you get tired of standing out there by yourself? Did you think you were alone most of the time?

TC: No, I had thirteen or fourteen senators that were always with me.

JE: Okay.

TC: Always with me. They just wouldn't lead. My deal is, is if the senators who claim to be fiscal conservatives would actually go up there and do the work, I mean, this isn't political, it isn't philosophical. This is waste, let's get rid of it. This is stupid, let's get rid of it.

So tell me why people won't do that? They won't do that because they've got their eye on their next election rather than the next generation. So they're not real leaders, they're followers.

JE: So they did retaliate because the Senate ruled that it was a conflict of interest to be a senator and to practice medicine on the weekends.

TC: Yeah.

JE: And they made you stop.

TC: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: How did you fight that?

TC: Well, I took it to the floor, lost the floor vote. Then they said I was still doing it because I didn't take my name down off my building and I was still listed as a doctor on the Muskogee Regional Medical Staff. I mean, it's just nothing but payback. Everything I did, the ethics committee came after me.

You know, when I was at the John Anson deal and his chief of staff trying to put their families back together, which we did, both of them are still married to their original wives. The very fact that they hammered me for seeing him and representing somebody, I didn't know it hadn't been a year.

It's now the senator's responsibility to know if you meet the requirements of being a lobbyist. No longer is it the lobbyist responsibility. Crazy. They set a precedent and it was only to punish me, and they've now reversed that precedent. But that's the games the children play when you're in their toy box and you're not playing according to their rules.

JE: So they didn't ever come after your practice? If you'd been playing their rules they'd have left you—

TC: No, they probably would just look the other way. I wasn't trying to make money, I was trying to keep my skills. That's what I was trying to do. So the House said, "As long as you don't make more money than your expenses in practicing medicine, you don't violate the House ethics rule.

And I tried to get the Senate to do that and they wouldn't do it. And what it really did is pee them off, they got peed off because they didn't think somebody could be a US senator and practice medicine. But they forgot the history of the US Senate. Because before me there were about forty doctors who practiced full time and were US senators. But it didn't matter anymore because we're in a totally different day because I wasn't playing their game.

Chapter 14 - 4:12
10,000 Stupid Things

John Erling: The difference between being in the House and the Senate, different rules? Is it easier to be a leader, is it easier to hear your issues heard?

Tom Coburn: Far easier to get your point of view out in the Senate. Far easier to stop bad stuff in the Senate, which I did, well over trillions of dollars of bad stuff never happened. It's a far better place to legislate from.

JE: It seems the House, very simply, is more emotional—

TC: It's supposed to be.

JE: And the Senate is more controlled, deliberative.

TC: They're supposed to be a representative of what the people want. That's why we have that based on population. You know, if you go back to our founding, the compromise for a Senate came because the small states worried that the large states would outvote them at every turn. So you came to a Senate that ended up with two senators.

But the other side of the Senate was they were supposed to be the reason, calm, because they weren't elected, they were appointed and that they didn't have a constituency that they had to respond to, other than the state legislature. And that they could actually make great decisions for the long-term best interest of the country.

Now that didn't necessarily work out every time that way, and there was some corruption. And that's how we got the Seventeenth Amendment. But the point is, our founders' thinking was great, because what you did is you took away the politician's desire to please somebody by spending somebody else's money on somebody else.

JE: Carrying on in your stead, Senator Jeff Flake, Republican from Arizona, released his first chronicle of government waste of 2015. Now you had done that for how many years?

TC: Six, seven, eight.

JE: Things like tailgating kids with a Koozie, apron, and food thermometer were provided for University of Nebraska football players through a five million dollar Department of Agriculture grant.

TC: Uh-huh (affirmative).

JE: I can list more and more of these. You probably remember some right off the top of your head.

TC: It's not hard, when we put out our list, we listed a hundred. But we chose from ten thousand. We—

JE: From ten thousand?

TC: Oh, yeah, there was ten thousand stupid things. Oh, there's probably a hundred thousand. We just quit looking, and then we said, "Which ones get the biggest PR bang if we list

them? I mean, I'm sick every day I think about how our government functions. From spending all the money at the end of the year, there's 75 billion dollars spent the last week of the fiscal year. That doesn't need to be spent. But they spend it because they think they might not get it next year.

Now if I was President, I'd issue an executive order the first year: As of this date, you will spend no more money this year. Period. And guess what? You'd save 70 billion dollars that year.

JE: We should say, during this political season, your name was bandied about. I heard, if you heard, as a candidate for President. Is that true?

TC: Well, somebody bandied it out, it wasn't me. I wasn't in the race, I'm not in the race. The fact is it looks like we got two candidates, or going to have two candidates. Let's see what happens to America.

JE: That was nice to know that Segal thought of you and your work despite the fact it doesn't seem like you liked it there. Did you like Washington at all?

TC: I liked the people, I mean, you just think about the clerks in the Senate. Really smart, sweet people. You think about the chaplain of the Senate. You think about my staff, all the great young people, brilliant, I mean, brilliant. They make me and you look like porkers how smart they are. And most of them aren't there anymore.

The guy that helped Jeff Flake do that was the guy that helped do it for me. No, the people, the people, I love people. I don't like cowards. I don't like people who are inconsistent. I don't like liars. I don't like finaglers. Tell me the truth, I'm big enough to deal with it, and then I'll try to go around you. But don't cheat. Don't cheat.

Chapter 15 - 6:45

Obamacare

John Erling: I'm quite certain you had words with the President over what we call Obamacare.

Tom Coburn: Sure.

JE: Did you talk directly to him about that?

TC: Sure.

JE: And you opposed it, of course?

TC: Yeah.

JE: Tell us about your back and forth with that.

TC: Well, I just told him it wouldn't work. And he knew it wouldn't work, but once you get it in, you can't hardly ever get it out. So that was the plan. I mean, they know next year it's going to be a disaster in this country as far as deductibles and copays.

JE: Next year because?

TC: Because this will be the year when everything kicks in. The average deductible is going to be something like eight or nine thousand dollars for the average American on these plans. Why have it? They can't afford that, plus they're going to be paying six or seven thousand dollars a year, or eight, for the insurance. So since when did it cost twenty thousand dollars to have healthcare? And the reason it costs that is because the government is in it in the first place.

You know, we've never tried since before World War II to allow markets to allocate the scarce resource of healthcare. And that doesn't mean it's perfect. A lot of people would fall through the holes, but not any more than they're falling through now. Except the cost would be about half.

JE: Republicans say, "When I get to Washington I want to end Obamacare." Is that possible here and at this point?

TC: It's possible if you have a Republican President and enough votes to get it out of the Senate.

JE: Wh—

TC: Or you could do it with reconciliation in the Senate on a budget as fifty-one votes.

JE: It would leave thousands of people without insurance.

TC: No.

JE: What do we—

TC: No, they'd go back to what they were.

JE: Some of them didn't have anything and they'd walk into hospitals and hospitals have to take care of them.

TC: Well, do you really think eighteen thousand dollars per person right now is—you've got to balance that, and remember, that cost was spread among all of us when they walk into an ER. It's not that the hospitals aren't getting paid, they're getting paid. They're taking it from those that can pay. You know any hospital's losing money? What we have is so much of medicine not going to help patients. That's our problem. You're not going to design a politbureau big enough to manage healthcare. You've got to let market forces manage it. And that means you have to have a real safety net for people who are going to fall through. And they are.

They're going to fall through Obamacare. Do you think that all the people that by law are supposed to be buying health insurance are buying it right now? No. Because they can't afford it. And they certainly could have afforded what they had before but it's been taken away.

JE: So how do you see this playing out? Republicans may not be able to do anything.

TC: I don't know how it plays out because you don't know what the mix is going to be starting January 1 of next year.

JE: Starting—right. You had mothers come to you who didn't have insurance and you performed the verdict.

TC: I've taken care of a lot of people without insurance.

JE: Right. You became known as Dr. No in the Senate. How did you like that? [laughing]

TC: I didn't care.

JE: You used the Senate hold privilege to prevent several bills from coming to the floor.

TC: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: Do you think you were helping by doing that? Senator Harry Reid got Senate Bill 3297 combined thirty-five bills, which you had blocked, into what Democrats call the Tomnibus Bill. So when you were doing that, what good were you doing?

TC: Well, I'm beating on that bill. He never got cloture on that bill. What he did is, look, that was all about land. The federal government owns about 580 million acres of land in this country. We can't take care of the land we got, and all those bills were about acquiring more land, putting the government in charge of more land, and I was blocking them.

I said, "First of all, you don't have the right under the Constitution to do that. Number two is you're not a good steward of the land you've got. And number three, we don't have the money. Plus when you buy the land it goes off the tax rolls for the states and makes the states poorer, not better."

So what he did is he took, I think, there was twenty bills that I was holding, but he added fifteen or sixteen more for things Republicans wanted, bought them into the bill. And I made this impassioned plea in our conference. I said, "You guys can vote with Harry Reid, but just remember, your right to hold is forever gone. That's a privilege the Senate has had since this Senate was founded. And you can always go around me, we get sixty votes and go around me. But if you're going to vote with Harry Reid to take away my right and your right to hold bills that are wasteful, they're not Constitutional, you'd better give it a second thought."

And so when cloture happened they only got fifty-four votes for cloture.

JE: Explain that, cloture, what do you mean?

TC: That means the right to proceed on to the bill.

JE: Right.

TC: And he didn't get enough votes to proceed on to the bill. So it taught him a lesson too, that you can run over everybody in the Senate only so far, and then people get it.

JE: Okay, that was just one example. But then you opposed parts of the legislation creating the Lewis and Clark Mount Hood Wilderness Area, which would add protections to wildlands in Oregon, Washington, and Idaho.

TC: Yeah.

JE: Why did you exercise that hold?

TC: Because we can't take care of the wildlands we've got under the federal government now. Where's the money going to come to do that? You got an 18 billion dollars backlog right now in the National Parks. They're falling apart. It's growing by 5 billion dollars a year and you're adding more scenic areas and more things for the government to be responsible for? The Park Service doesn't want any more of this stuff. It's a politician wants it so they can go home and say, "Look what I did for us." Even though we can't afford it, even though your kids won't ever get to play here because it's going to fall apart.

You know, if we had plenty of money I wouldn't be opposing that stuff. We don't! I'm happy to oppose it, proud, beat my chest. From an economic sense, it's the stupid thing to do. But I know it's also the politically expedient thing.

JE: Some of these senators when you're out of committee and so forth in the hallway, they can walk up to you and say, "Hey," they're mad at you or whatever.

TC: No, no, they say, "Let my bill go."

I said, "Well, come on into my office, we'll figure out a way to make it Constitutional and pay for it."

You know how many of them did? Oh, one or two. And those we got passed. You know, if you're willing to work with me, let's find a way to not violate the Constitution and let's find a funding source so that you're not adding it to your own kids when you want to do this. And you can still look good at home—I know this is all about looking good at home—but let's do it the right way. Let's pay for it and let's make sure we don't violate the enumerated power cause. Or let's don't violate the Tenth Amendment.

Chapter 16 - 4:20

Rule of Rulers

John Erling: You're very involved yet today, you're out of office, but as a citizen you testified recently before Senate Committee. You were on the Homeland Security and Government Affairs Committee—

Tom Coburn: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: You were on there and you testified before them. You urged them to work harder to eliminate waste. You said, "America doesn't trust you anymore and that people believe Congress wastes hundreds of billions of dollars." So how does that testimony go over in that committee?

TC: They know it, they can't get it out. No, they got twenty-five bills right now that are bipartisan bills that Harry Reid won't let out. He won't let his members vote for cloture.

JE: Because?

TC: Because he doesn't want them to have a win. It's all parts of politics. Even though it's bipartisan bills. Who's the committee chairman? Ron Johnson. What's he doing? He's running for re-election in Wisconsin. He don't want him to have anything that would look good to the people of Wisconsin that he did something about saving money.

JE: You know, if all of America had the knowledge that you have and what you—

TC: They'd vomit.

JE: [laughing] Well, they would, but probably more so than vomit. There would be, I don't know.

TC: It's coming.

JE: What's coming?

TC: Anarchy. It's coming. You're going to see civil disobedience first. And if that doesn't work, then you're going to see anarchy. You're going to see people saying, "Look, you're not enforcing the law on the border, why should you enforce this law on me? You're going to pick and choose?"

So what we really have now is the rule of rulers, not the rule of law. And that's what's happened as you disintegrate and don't enforce the rule of law. So people no longer trust it.

I'll give you a great example. Black Lives Matter matters, and the reason it matters is this large group of people, rightly or wrongly, and probably rightly, feel the rule of law hasn't treated them right. We better fix that, and we should fix that because they're going to say, "The law doesn't apply." Just like people in South Texas are saying, "Sorry, law doesn't apply."

All that is leadership. When you have a federal law that says marijuana is illegal, it's a Phase One drug, and you don't enforce that, what are you telling people? Aah, laws don't matter.

So either take it off the books or enforce it. But don't be in between. What's happening to our country is the disintegration of our country right now over the rule of law.

JE: Not all great governments have succeeded. The fall of Rome and all these.

TC: Every great civilization last two hundred years.

JE: Right. So what about our democracy?

TC: I think we can cheat history if we have good leadership. I think we could. The question is whether we will or not.

JE: The Government Accountability Office, Congress's auditing arm, released the sixth Annual Report the other week. They said, "Efforts from your legislation resulted in around 56 billion dollars, 2010 to 2015. And an additional 69 billion dollars projected to be accrued through 2025."

TC: Well, what it should have been is 600 billion dollars, you know?

JE: All right. But aren't you pleased with that number?

TC: Well, it's chump change when you're running trillion dollar deficits. This is the easy pickin' stuff. This is the easy stuff. When in Oklahoma, we have forty-three federal work training sites and not one of them can demonstrate efficacy, what are they good for? They're good for hiring workers to train workers. They're not good for training workers.

In Ada, with an unemployment rate under 4 percent, we had thirteen separate federal-run work force training programs. So what are we doing? We're employing people in work places, but we're not training people. We're just spending our money, it's all a big waste. There's no drawl contracted, they all have constituencies. Certain members of our delegation protect them so they can keep their jobs, and keep the jobs in those towns.

JE: But this just seems so big and gargantuan.

TC: It is, that's why you've got to have a convention in the States to where you start limiting the role of federal government.

JE: All right.

Chapter 17 - 4:00 Convention of States

John Erling: So right now you are working on a Constitutional Convention?

Tom Coburn: No. It's a Convention of States, totally different. A Constitutional Convention says you're going to have a convention where you write a Constitution. A Convention of States as specified in Article Five, specifically gives you the range at which you can offer amendments. That's what we're doing. And that's in three areas. One in federal financial management, i.e., a balanced budget amendment with general accepted county process and limited borrowing.

Number two, term limits on federal officials, not just members of Congress.

And number three, limiting the scope and jurisdiction of the federal government. Great example. EPA issues a guideline. No member of Congress ever said they agreed with it. But it's law, just like if we passed the statute.

One of the things we would do is Constitutional amendment if we could get thirty-eight states to agree to it. Because you remember, Congress ought to have to vote on that before that's a law. A felony law that you can end up in prison on. Because they never voted on it, they never intended that.

So reining back, eighty-eight thousand rules and regulations. The average American violates three of them every day.

JE: Hmm (thoughtful sound).

TC: Three.

JE: Thirty-three amendments to the Constitution have been approved by Congress and sent to the states for ratification.

TC: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: In Article Five, isn't there a question as to how many amendments can be dealt with?

TC: No.

JE: Two law professors who are suggesting that a convention would have the power to propose anything it sees fit. And then another one believed that a limited convention is possible where you could—

TC: Well, everybody that has done any work before the Supreme Court on Article Five agrees with the other side of that. And actually tried the cases in front of the Supreme Court. So let's say they're right. You still got to have thirty-eight states to approve anything this body recommends. Which means all it takes is thirteen ornery cusses like me, sitting on a judiciary committee saying, "We're not going to take it out."

It's the safest of all forms and it's what our founders gave us when we have a problem this big. I mean, how are we going to get rid of 142 trillion dollars' worth of debt in unfunded liabilities? We're going to keep doing what we're doing today? Or are we going to return some power and responsibility back to the state?

Look at Oklahoma schools; 65 percent of the money for Oklahoma schools, our state legislature can't decide one issue on, it's all mandated by bureaucrats from Washington. Since 1976, 3.6 trillion dollars has been spent on education, 3.6. From the federal government to the states.

Name one parameter, as far as education, that is better since the federal government got involved in it.

Now take Region, take Metro Christian, their cost to educate a child is about 40 percent less than the state spends. Why is that? I would tell you, the education's better, so why is that? It's because there's some accountability.

Thomas Jefferson said, "To actually have the federal government in education you'd have to have an amendment to the Constitution." His quote, when he was developing the University of Virginia.

So we're way away from what was intended. Some, maybe good, most, we've lost limited government, we've lost lots of our freedoms and we're going to pay the price. You and I aren't, generations that follow us, they're going to suck wind.

JE: So in this state by state effort, where are we? Oklahoma now became the seventh state to approve a resolution.

TC: Um-hmm (affirmative), Missouri will be the eighth.

JE: Thirty-four states would have to be approved—

TC: Yeah, it's going to take two or three more years.

JE: And you're on that journey to make that happen.

TC: Um-hmm, um-hmm (affirmatives).

JE: Do you feel good about that?

TC: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: That it's going to happen?

TC: I think it's the only thing that saves our country. I don't think the politicians are ever going to save our country. I don't think they're going to stand up and take the votes that are going to end their careers but will actually fix our country, and go down as heroes.

Chapter 18 - 5:40

Intelligence Committee

John Erling: When you look back on your career, what are the things you're most proud of?

Tom Coburn: Having a great staff that were honest with me, one. Delivering over four thousand babies and having a great medical staff. Number three, having a great family, probably that should go first rather than third. I don't think any of the compliments are much. I mean, we didn't stop the bleeding. There's nothing you can do in Washington with one man that's going to fix it. Unless you have a revolution in this country that sends people who are not politicians to Washington. And then you'll fix it.

JE: And there is that attitude right now.

TC: Sure.

JE: Whether you like Trump or even Bernie Sanders. He has that young crowd that—

TC: Well, he has the young crowd because he's a socialist/Marxist that says, "I'm going to give everything to you for free. And the banks are bad because they have money and you don't, so, therefore, we're going to take it from the banks and give it to you."

JE: But we're sensing, maybe because of this campaign, more of an unrest out there than maybe we thought.

TC: It's been there.

JE: But now it's public. Everybody knows about it.

TC: Well, if you've been traveling around you would have known about it. I'm not surprised at all. I'm actually helping generate some of it.

JE: Right now we're talking about Hilary Clinton for the Democrats, and we don't know if the rest of the country is feeling an unrest as the Republican voters have in the primary. If the whole country is like this, then Donald Trump is a shoe-in.

TC: Well, I don't doubt that Donald Trump can win.

JE: Because of this unrest that we're talking about?

TC: Yeah.

JE: And they don't care what he has said, they feel that he says he's going to be this kind of person.

TC: Yeah, yeah, in spite of how he treats people.

JE: Let me ask you about 9/11, September 11, 2001, when the attack was on our country by Al-Qaida. Crashing planes on the upper floors of the North and South Towers of the World Trade Center. Third plane into the Pentagon at Arlington, and the fourth crashes in a field in Western Pennsylvania. Where were you and what were your thoughts when that was happening?

TC: I was in Colorado, watching it on TV. It was an Intelligence failure.

JE: Intelligence failure?

TC: Um-hmm (affirmative). It was.

JE: How? We should have known this was going to happen?

TC: Yeah.

JE: Or we did know it and didn't do anything about it?

TC: No, no, I can't—I just would tell you it's an Intelligence failure.

JE: We failed to pick up on it.

TC: Well, there's lots of signs. If you read the 9/11 Report, just go read it. All the things that were missed.

JE: Now today the whole world is under attack by ISIS and Al-Qaida. Terrorists attack recently in Belgium, Paris, and all. We hear some say, maybe even including the President, that we're going to stop terrorism. Do you think that's possible?

TC: No. But I think you can contain it. I'd just refer you, I can't quote it, back to what Churchill said about radical Islam. Just go look it up, it's a heck of a quote, but we're seeing it live out what he predicted.

JE: Don't you think it's something that we'll just, okay, contain it, but we'll never eradicate it?

TC: Not until the radicalism of the mosques teach something different than what they're teaching.

JE: The mosques are teaching radicalism?

TC: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: In America?

TC: Again, I can't go into de—I was on the Intelligence Committee, I can't answer questions that might—

JE: And I was going to ask you then, being on the Intelligence Committee, is that almost frightening to know really what is happening? And can that be shared with the general

public? If the general public knew what you knew on the Intelligence Committee, would it frighten people?

TC: No, I don't think so. I think it'd make them proud. I mean, all these people who will never be recognized by Americans for what they did, their sacrifices they've made, the risks they've taken, and I'm talking thousands that are around the world, Americans that are doing their jobs, protecting this country. You'll never hear about them. They'll never be written up, it'll never be in their obituary, I mean, you just never know. But they do heroic deeds every day.

JE: In defense of our country?

TC: In defense of our country. And that's not to put down our military. I'm just talking of our operatives.

JE: Did you almost say something there about mosques that you knew from the Senate?

TC: No, no I'm not going to answer that either.

JE: [laughing] So you still have information that cannot be shared.

TC: I do.

JE: That is still relevant information to that committee.

TC: Yes. Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: Did you enjoy being—

TC: That was the best committee I was on.

JE: Why was that?

TC: Because we did great oversight all the time. We met twice a week, three or four hours at a time. We had the Intelligence Committee, we had the NSA, you know, we had every aspect there telling us what they were doing all the time. They were the most oversighted branch of the federal government.

JE: You were there just to collect information? Could you—

TC: Oh, no, we went out and visited NSA. You know, I did all the stuff you're supposed to do to make sure you're not getting lied to.

JE: So that was your mission?

TC: Yeah, trust but verify.

JE: Ronald Reagan.

TC: Yeah. And we've got a great intel community. I mean, half of what Snowden says isn't true.

JE: Tell us who Snowden is.

TC: Snowden is the guy that leaked all the information that was a contractor for NSA and stole a bunch of material. But his interpretation and what he said wasn't, half of isn't accurate, some of it's accurate. But he hurt us immensely, in terms of our ability to protect ourselves.

JE: He put people in harm's way?

TC: He put people in harm's way, he shut down major programs. They had to be withdrawn so our technology wouldn't be lost.

JE: He should be in America and—

TC: He should be hung.

JE: He should be hung?

TC: As a traitor.

Chapter 19 - 4:40

Advice for Future Politicians

John Erling: What advice do you give? Would you encourage young people to get involved? To get in that dirty game of politics?

Tom Coburn: No, I'd encourage them to go get a job for thirty-five or forty years and then get in the game of politics. You know, the problem with half our politicians is they don't know anything. They don't anything about life, they don't know anything about real world experience, they don't have a frame of reference. And that's what they need.

I don't have time to go into it but so many conversations I had in Washington people were clueless about common things that you and I would vote no.

JE: Because they were in their early thirties, they were too young to—

TC: No, they were in their sixties but they'd been a politician for forty years—

JE: Oh.

TC: ...and didn't know.

JE: Okay, on that side. But then there's the youth side that comes along and—

TC: But the youth side doesn't know anything either. They may have studied well, but life's lessons are great for politics. You don't always win, there's cost to anything that you do. And you've got to be willing to pay the cost. I wouldn't discourage any young person from looking at it, but I would tell you, the younger they are, the less likely you're going to be good at it. Because what it requires is judgment and people skills.

JE: Somebody might say after they listen to our conversation that you've become very cynical. Would that be accurate?

TC: No, I'm very honest. I'm hopeful because I think we can do an Article Five Convention of States and think we can fix it. I'm not cynical about the Senate and the House and Washington. I know we're not going to fix our problems. That's not cynical, that's knowledge. And that's knowledge based on the efforts of trying to do it there. That's not cynical, that's just truth. It isn't going to happen in Washington.

JE: *60 Minutes*, a noted news program—I talk like this because I’m thinking about people who are going to listen to this—

TC: Yeah, yeah.

JE: *60 Minutes*, a CBS respectable news program interviewed you as you were leaving the Senate.

TC: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: And they said this: “This is an interesting man. He’s an obstetrician, who has delivered over four thousand babies, called the Godfather of the Tea Party,” would that be accurate?

TC: That’s somebody else’s claim.

JE: “He has been a powerful and effective force against government spending. He opposes gay marriage. He’s against abortion rights and says global warming doesn’t exist.” And then they go on to say, “He became one of Barak Obama’s closest friends in Congress. It may be Washington’s most unlikely friendship but it is a lesson that political opposites can work together in highly partisan and dysfunctional times.”

That paragraph by *60 Minutes*, would you agree with it?

TC: Oh, I guess. It’s interesting the predicate is you’re a flat-earth person if you don’t believe in global warming. They didn’t say anything about climate change. Right now global warming is all on my side. We’ve been warming for sixteen years. That’s what the science says. But they use that as a moniker to say, “Yeah, there’s something wrong with this guy if he doesn’t believe this.” That’s the predicate that was put into that.

Or if you don’t believe in abortion, there’s something wrong with you. In other words, from their viewpoint. So other than that, yeah, I admit to all those things they claim but that doesn’t keep me from working with other people.

JE: We didn’t get into global warming but you just don’t think the science is there?

TC: The science isn’t there, matter of fact, the science is exactly the opposite of what they have said. That doesn’t have anything to do with climate change. The climate change is all the time. We have historical fossil records, we have historical ice records, we know it’s changing.

But global warming, that’s a farce. It isn’t happening. We’re in a cooling period right now and it’s going to continue for another thirty or forty years.

JE: All right. So then we ask, how would you like to be remembered?

TC: I don’t.

JE: Meaning you don’t want to be remembered?

TC: No, remembering is about ego. You know, the only people I want remembering me is my kids and grandkids. And my friends. This whole idea, matter of fact, I’ll never forget in a debate with Brad Carson, we were asked that question: How would you want to be remembered?

And he said, "Well, I want to be like Bellmon and I want to be like Kerr."

And I said, "It isn't about me, it's not about us, it's about fixing our country. And if we're remembering people, unless we get the country fixed, if we get the country fixed, then remember me. If we don't, forget it, I just tried.

JE: But you also want to be known as a great doctor.

TC: But that's an assessment by my patients, and they'll know that no matter what I do

JE: You're right. Well, thank you for giving us.

TC: You're welcome.

JE: And your forthrightness, that was all good. And students years from now can listen and hear about Tom Coburn.

Chapter 20 - 0:33

Conclusion

Announcer: This oral history presentation is made possible through the support of our generous foundation-funders. We encourage you to join them by making your donation, which will allow us to record future stories. Students, teachers, and librarians are using this website for research and the general public is listening every day to these great Oklahomans share their life experience.

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