

Tom A. Coburn with John Hart (and a Forward by Robert Novak). *Breach of Trust: How Washington Turns Outsiders into Insiders*. (Nashville, TN: WND Books, 2003), pp. 272. \$24.99 (ISBN 0-7852-6220-2) hc

**Medical doctors are becoming more prominent** in American politics. Earlier this decade Dr. Bill Frist became Majority Leader of the U.S. Senate. Dr. Howard Dean was for a few months in 2004 the leading candidate for the Democratic nomination for President of the United States. Then there is Oklahoma's own Dr. Tom Coburn, Oklahoma's newly elected United States Senator, who, with some acknowledged help, has written a semi-autobiography of his three terms of service in the United States House of Representatives in Washington, D.C.

Interspersed throughout Coburn's book are ten observations about what the U.S. Congress doesn't want you to know about how it spends your tax dollars. As imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, I am adopting his template for this book review, listing ten observations (reflecting my own humble personal opinion) that you, as a professional political scientist, might find useful to know about either U.S. Senator Tom Coburn and/or his book, *Breach of Trust*:

1. Tom Coburn is more a libertarian (or even an anarchist) than a conservative. Liberals build schools and hire teachers. Conservatives build prisons and hire police. Libertarians close down public institutions and privatize any remaining jobs. Senator Coburn's agenda has always

been to shrink and reduce government, rather than to make it work or to carry out an ideological agenda. Likewise, he is more a radical or revolutionary than a Republican. Coburn is more interested in limiting (if not eliminating) government than he is in his political party, directing or controlling it.

2. Ideological purity is more important to him than party loyalty. Remember, this book is an attack by Coburn on his own Republican Party in Congress (not the Democrats in Congress) because the GOP opted for political expediency rather than ideological purity. Who else would lead a revolt against Newt Gingrich because he believed the Speaker to be too liberal or not confrontational enough with the Democrats? Most of us learned in our “Parties and Pressure Groups” class the difference between the two. The political parties seek to control the governmental process while the pressure group wants the government to adopt a specific policy. Using this distinction, Dr. Coburn is a member of a pressure or interest group rather than a political party.

3. As if reinventing the wheel or rediscovering fire, Senator Coburn has stumbled upon “The Iron Law of Oligarchy” as originally promulgated by Roberto Michels in his 1911 volume *Political Parties*. This concept is well known and easily recognized by any public administrator or student of administrative theory. Dr. Coburn’s Republican Party (GOP) behaved just like Michels’ German Social Democratic Party (SDP) did approximately 100 years earlier—the party compromised its principles to retain political power. Specifically, Senator Coburn’s Congressional Republicans favored lots of federal spending and big federal deficits as they viewed it as a key to being reelected and retaining if not expanding their political power. Likewise, the Republican leadership of the U.S. House of Representatives took a position on term limits that shocked Coburn but would be immediately recognized by anyone familiar with Michels: now that we are in power, there is no real immediate need to adopt term limits. Hence, this explains the title of Coburn’s book. As recounted by Coburn, this devotion to institutional self-interest is not just limited to the Republican Party but the American Medical Association (AMA) as well. Dr. Coburn reports AMA lobbyists knew next to nothing about the medical profession or about the problems or needs facing the practicing medical doctor—the

clients whose interests they were supposedly promoting. Dr. Coburn was surprised that the AMA hired lawyers as lobbyists.

4. This is a buddy book, not the tale of a lone wolf defying the powers that be. Whenever Tom Coburn takes political action in the Congressional arena, it is in alliance with Tulsa Congressman Steve Largent. The two fight their political battles side by side, arm-in-arm, and in lockstep together. They are political Siamese twins in any partisan skirmish or fray.

5. This is not the first (or even the best) tale of a naïve, very conservative Republican being elected to the legislature, becoming dismayed by its operations, and penning a tell-all exposé. H.L. “Bill” Richardson did it earlier (and better) chronicling his experiences in the California State Senate beginning in the 1960s. *What Makes You Think We Read the Bills?* is not only better written but far more entertaining and enlightening about the legislative process. (The book has since been reissued.)

6. What I learned from the book that I didn’t already know was that Congressman J.C. Watts represented Oklahoma City, Oklahoma (page 99). True, Oklahoma City had been dismembered in a gerrymander that gave nearly every member of the Oklahoma Congressional delegation a portion within the city limits but, silly me; I thought the core of OKC was represented during that time by Ernest “Jim” Istook while Watts represented mostly southwestern Oklahoma.

7. Unlike fellow Republican Teddy Roosevelt, who supposedly said the first duty of a statesman is to be re-elected, Tom Coburn, a firm advocate of term limits, did not seek re-election after three terms as he had promised. Like Teddy Roosevelt, who said he would not run for re-election (1908) and then later explained it to mean only at that specific time—but not later (1912), Coburn never promised not to seek a higher office at a later date. Unlike TR, Coburn was successful in his efforts.

8. Despite its length of 254 pages of text, there is far less to this book than meets the eye. It is padded with lengthy quotes, excerpts of editorials, snippets of articles, and speeches from Coburn and other's who agree with or praise him or his position. Having examined a few padded term papers myself, I recognize one when I read it. However, those works were never offered for sale to an unsuspecting public. Note: there is no index, bibliography, or appendix, although in the conclusion Senator Coburn does provide a plan for action and there are two addendums in the middle of the volume.

9. Dr. Coburn writes from the perspective of a businessman who wants the government to deregulate and untax his efforts so he can run his business the way he wants and make a profit, not as a medical doctor who is dedicated to the welfare of his patients. (However, I am equally dismayed, as was Dr. Coburn, that his offer of advice on matters of medical policy was rebuffed by the leadership of his own party and I personally applaud his efforts combating AIDS/HIV.)

10. If I was requested to recommend a book that is an autobiography of a young, idealistic, maverick Republican, who is elected to the U.S. House of Representatives, does not compromise his principles, battles the leadership of his own party, and eventually is a victorious candidate for the U.S. Senate, I would not hesitate for a moment. The book I heartily recommend is *Fighting Liberal: The Autobiography of George W. Norris*.

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