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The Obama-Coburn Connection

US Sen. **Tom Coburn** (R-OK) has the reputation for being one of the Senate's most conservative members, with an aversion to federal spending, and especially to earmarks, that is consistently vehement. So although Coburn and President-elect **Barack Obama** have at times cooperated on mutual goals, it still came as a surprise recently to hear Coburn on CNBC speaking favorably of Obama's pending economic stimulus package.

Most of Coburn's praise centered on Obama's tax cut component, which may account for 40% of the stimulus. And Coburn made clear that he's on good terms with the president-elect, noting that he had spoken with Obama in the past few days about his economic plans. The Oklahoma GOPer used a warm and favorable tone toward Obama that conservatives rarely use for liberals (and vice versa). Coburn, for example, did not echo the starchy coolness that Senate Minority Leader **Mitch McConnell** (R-KY) exhibited toward Obama's package when he questioned the amount of money involved -- some \$800 billion, or perhaps as much as \$1 trillion.

Indeed, Coburn has sounded much more favorable to Obama's economic policies than some high-placed Democrats. "I think the

things that Coburn said he found good in Obama's stimulus package are some of the things you've heard some Democrats complain about," says **Chad Alexander**, a political consultant. Such high-placed Democrats as Senate Finance Committee members **John Kerry** (MA) and **Kent Conrad** (ND) have been publicly critical of various aspects of Obama's stimulus package, among them the tax cuts and a tax credit for employers who hire additional employees.

The Obama-Coburn alliance illustrates the flip-side of a polarizing response to Obama's policies which appears to be developing in Washington. Liberal Democrats fear the president-elect is giving away the store in a futile attempt to court the GOP, and conservative Republicans fear the charming Obama is seducing them into what will eventually become a major federal spending spree, with disastrous consequences for the economy long-term.

Regardless of the national political dynamics at play, however, Coburn is likely to stay on the good side of Sooner State voters, including his conservative backers. Coburn's favorable comments about Obama's economic policies "won't upset conservatives here," says



Alexander, a former Oklahoma state Republican chairman. “Coburn has a reputation for being such a maverick on spending issues that folks give him the benefit of any doubt,” agrees **Mike McCarville**, a long-time right-leaning Oklahoma radio talk show host and journalist.

Oklahomans are used to Coburn’s reaching across the aisle on some issues. “Coburn has demonstrated in the House and Senate that he’ll work with anybody with whom he agrees on an issue, whether liberal or conservative, Democratic or Republican,” says McCarville.

Kyle Loveless, a Republican consultant whose wife once worked on Coburn US House staff, says of Coburn, “He’s principled and holds to his principles, but he does not let party get in his way.” Loveless notes that Coburn and Obama struck up a good relationship on several past issues, most notably the Federal Funding Accountability and Transparency Act, successfully sponsored by Coburn and Obama in 2006, which requires full public disclosure of all recipients of federal funds. Obama cited this legislation several times in his campaign as evidence he could work across party lines. “Eighty- to ninety percent of stuff they disagree on, but in some areas they agree,” concludes Loveless.

Moreover, folks in Oklahoma are familiar with and trust Coburn’s maverick’s approach to politics. Many know that when you call his US Senate office, his receptionist answers the phone, “Dr. Coburn’s office,” not “Senator Coburn’s office,” a symbol of his long-running feud with the Senate over his continuing to deliver babies while he serves in Congress’s stuffy upper chamber.

Coburn comes up for re-election next year and has not decided whether he will run again. Since **John McCain** carried every single

county in Oklahoma, Coburn’s warm relationship with Obama does not appear designed to help Coburn win votes in 2010. But Coburn does have the luxury of operating in a political environment that is favorable to him; his approval rating hovers around 60%.

So what will this odd-couple cooperation mean in the long term, for the Obama Administration or for Oklahoma? “On several issues ... [Coburn] has found common ground with Obama,” concludes McCarville, but “how far this will go, nobody knows.”

Texas: Defeat of Craddick a Blow to Conservatives

The election of state Rep. **Joe Straus** (R) to replace Texas House Speaker **Tom Craddick** (R) on January 13 could produce a significant shift to the center and left, away from the conservatism that has dominated the chamber for the six years of Craddick’s time in the office. While Straus is known as a supporter of business and of fiscal conservatism, he veers from GOP orthodoxy on at least two key issues, the environment and abortion, and perhaps on legalized gambling as well.

The Impact. How will the Texas House be different under Straus than it has been for the past three terms under the staunch conservatism of Craddick? We asked three observers and got three different answers.

“That’s a good question, one we’re all asking.” says state Rep. **Will Hartnett** (R), a conservative and a former Craddick backer. “Straus is such a relative unknown, we don’t know. ... We’re all hoping for the best.”

“It will be more inclusive,” says state Rep. **Joe Pickett** (D), a Straus supporter, “more representative of the people who we’re supposed to represent.” Pickett says the race was not about issues. “You don’t run for



speaker on issues. [It's about] whether you can let everybody's voice be heard."

"The Democrats are going to run this place, that's the bottom line," says another Austin insider who follows state capitol matters. "My guess is there will be eight to ten new Democratic [committee] chairmen and Democratic majorities on some key committees." This would be a sharp departure from the right-leaning team that held sway during the Craddick regime.

If the House does become significantly more liberal and/or Democratic, it could spell trouble for Gov. **Rick Perry** (R), who is running for re-election in 2010. "He'd better get a truck-load of veto pens ready," says our Austin source. A Straus-led House could also enhance the power of Lt. Gov. **David Dewhurst** (R), the key power in the GOP-run state Senate.

Straus, 48, is a wealthy insurance executive and from a long-time Republican family in San Antonio, but his GOP roots are sunk in fiscal, not social, conservatism. Moreover, he is also friendlier to environmental goals than are most GOP conservatives.

On the environment, the betting is that a Straus-run House will support more pro-conservation measures, as well as provide incentives for alternative energy besides the already-established wind power.

On abortion, a key issue for social conservatives, Straus has a moderately conservative stance. He is pro-life, but does favor allowing legal abortions for reasons of rape, incest and the health of the mother. The last is considered a substantial loop-hole by many pro-life groups.

Thirdly, because Straus's family is the major owner of a race track in San Antonio, he will

be watched carefully to see if he allows legislation that would legalize casino and slot machine gambling at Texas racetracks. "This could be the big one," says the Austin insider.

How It Happened. On Friday, January 2, the eleven-member ABC (Anybody But Craddick) Republican caucus met and settled on newcomer (two terms) Straus as its candidate for speaker. In the next 48 hours, a rash of wheeling and dealing quickly refigured the political landscape in the House.

Two days later, Straus released a list of 88 representatives who were supporting him -- well above a majority of the 150 member House. About the same time, Craddick announced that he was withdrawing his candidacy. Straus's initial list of supporters -- which continued to grow -- included 72 Democrats (all but two of the 74 in the House) and 16 Republicans, mostly from the GOP's moderate wing.

At last-minute effort to derail Straus's election as speaker by state Rep. **John Smithee** (R), a conservative GOPer, ended a day after it began, when Smithee withdrew. He had the backing of most of Craddick's former supporters, but that was not enough to stop Straus. Eventually, all House members joined in a unanimous vote for Straus.

Arkansas: Can the GOP Regroup?

In 2005, the year before the 2006 election, Razorback Republicans were in their glory days. They were finishing ten years with Gov. **Mike Huckabee** (R) running the state and their popular Lt. Gov. **Win Rockefeller** (R) was favored to beat Democrat **Mike Beebe** in the race to succeed Huckabee. **Tim Hutchinson** had represented the state in the US Senate, though he lost in 2002, while his



brother **Asa Hutchinson**, who had succeeded Tim in Congress, was running for governor.

Despite this apparently strong position, in the legislature, the Arkansas GOP had a smaller share of Republicans than any other Dixie legislature. So given the lack of a farm team, by 2008, the Razorback GOP failed to even field a candidate against US Sen. **David Pryor** (D), and is considered a long-shot in the gubernatorial and senatorial races in 2010.

Top Heavy GOP. So what happened? The simple answer is that the party was top-heavy, and when these leaders were gone, there was no farm team to replace them. .

In 2002, Tim Hutchinson lost his US Senate seat after a well-publicized divorce.

In 2005, Rockefeller learned he had an incurable cancer and withdrew from the race for governor; in 2006, he suffered a tragic and early death from cancer, removing one of the GOP's stars from the political scene.

In 2006, Asa Hutchinson, like his brother a strong conservative -- both are alumni of Bob Jones University -- lost his gubernatorial bid, in part because the ticket tilted too far right for Arkansas's Deep South yet somewhat-moderate voters. "The perception was the Republicans were completely off the reservation," says a Little Rock insider (R).

In 2008, Huckabee ran for president, not for the US Senate against Pryor, as some GOPers had hoped, and is a *Fox News* commentator.

At the same time the GOP was losing its top tier leadership, the scrappy Democrats survived their time out of power healthier than ever, with strong majorities in both houses of the legislature and three of the state's four US House seats. They had solid contenders for major statewide offices and projected a

pragmatic, moderate image that helped them win and hold both US Senate seats and the governorship.

With Rockefeller, Huckabee and the Hutchinsons off-stage, Republicans found themselves in 2008 without strong candidates. Rather than use energy and resources on behalf of a sacrificial lamb against Pryor, "We decided to focus on local races," says Arkansas GOP Executive Director **Karen Ray**. And they were pleased with the results: Republicans picked up three seats in the state House of Representatives, bringing them to a 72D-28R ratio, and held their own in the Senate, including reelecting former state chair **Gilbert Baker** (R) over a strong, well-financed Democratic challenger. And not to be sneezed at, McCain got 59% in the state.

A Republican Recovery? Can Arkansas Republicans stage a come-back? A political party can't prosper, even as the minority party, if it doesn't compete for the top offices. So will the Arkansas GOP's plans for 2010 include nominating candidates for governor and US Senator? "Absolutely," says Ray.

That means tackling Gov. **Mike Beebe** (D), who will be seeking a second term and so far looks like a strong bet for re-election, as well as running against popular moderate US Sen. **Blanche Lincoln** (D). That's a tall order. Indeed, SPR's Little Rock insider (R) believes in 2010 the party should not "get bogged down in many campaigns they can't win, like [against] Beebe. He can't be beat." Lincoln, however "is vulnerable," he says, especially if she votes for such measures as the union-boosting bill that would abolish the secret ballot in unionization elections.

In any case, the party started recruiting 2010 candidates about two weeks after the 2008 election -- for both statewide and local offices.



While GOP headquarters wouldn't name names, potential candidates -- especially for Lincoln's US Senate seat -- include **Tom Cotton**, a Harvard Law graduate and a US Army officer who served in Iraq and is now in Afghanistan; former US Treasury Official **French Hill**; and **Patrick Calhoun**, a Little Rock investment banker. SPR's Little Rock insider says that Cotton could benefit from a statewide race, even if he loses: "He could energize voters and build name ID" for a future race.

There's even GOP talk of running a strong campaign for the 2nd District (Little Rock, etc.) congressional seat currently held by seven-term US Rep. **Vic Snyder** (D). While Snyder is popular, some Republican insiders believe that the 61-year old father of recently born triplets may want to retire. That appears to be wishful thinking, however, as Snyder made clear in December that he plans to run again next year. Moreover, SPR would bet that the triplets (three boys) are likely to gain -- not lose -- votes for their already popular father.

While it is far too early to guesstimate the political climate in 2010, it may be another disappointing year for Arkansas Republicans, at least on the statewide and congressional level. Then again, they might add to their farm team for 2012, if you want to look that far down the road.

Grits

? **Oklahoma: Gearing Up for 2010.** Lt. Gov. **Jari Askins** (D) is preparing to run for governor of Oklahoma in 2010, according to a letter she sent this month to a list of her supporters. Before her election as lieutenant governor in 2008, Askins served in the state legislature and as chairwoman of the Oklahoma Pardon and Parole Board. State Attorney General **Drew Edmondson** (D) is

also expected to seek the Democratic nomination. On the GOP side, two members of Congress, **Mary Fallin** and **Tom Cole**, are potential contenders. Askins will be leaving the number two spot open, and state Sen. **Kenneth Corn** (D) is expected to announce soon that he will run for lieutenant governor next year. The list of organizations in which he is a member includes the National Rifle Association, taking off the table one of the GOP's major issues against Democratic candidates in much of the South.

? **Kentucky: Stumbo Ousts Richards in Speaker's Race.** State Rep. **Greg Stumbo** (D) defeated Kentucky House Speaker **Jody Richards** (D) on January 6 in a 34-31 vote in the Democratic caucus. Richards, who made unsuccessful races for governor in 2003 and 2007, had served as speaker for 14 years, longer than anyone else in the state's history. Stumbo's victory is a boost for allowing slot machines at the state's race tracks, a proposal he has championed for several years.

? **Tennessee: Frist Says No, Wamp Says Yes, to Governor's Race.** Former US Senate Majority Leader **Bill Frist** (R) announced that he will not seek the Tennessee governorship next year. Had he run, he would have been a heavy favorite for the Republican nomination. One day after Frist bowed out, US Rep. **Zach Wamp** (R), who won his eighth term last November, announced that he will run for governor. Wamp has long harbored gubernatorial ambitions. *Roll Call* newspaper reports that Wamp has already garnered the endorsement of former US Sen. **Bill Brock** (R-TN), who once represented Wamp's district. (Wamp, however, will not get Brock's vote, since Brock is now a resident of Maryland.) While Wamp will be a strong contender, he will not clear the field, as Frist most likely would have. Wamp's strength is primarily in East Tennessee in his 3rd District



(Chattanooga, etc.) Two other Republicans have since announced, Knoxville Mayor **Bill Haslam**, who would also be strong in the Eastern counties, and Memphis District Attorney **Bill Gibbons**, whose base would be in the Western area of the state.

? **GOP Whip Beefs Up Communications Staff.** Don't be surprised to see House Minority Whip **Eric Cantor** (R-VA) more in the news in the coming months. Cantor, a rising star in GOP ranks, sees the main task of the Republican minority in the House as getting its message out. To that end, Cantor has hired three new staff members with top-level communications experience. According to *Politico* newspaper, the Minority Whip's staff now includes former communications aides from the Republican Study Committee, the McCain-Palin campaign, and the Republican National Committee.

? **Virginia: McAuliffe Enters Governor's Race.** Former National Democratic Chairman **Terry McAuliffe** officially announced his candidacy for governor of Virginia in a statewide swing on January 7, including a stop in Richmond. He promised to create a business plan for Virginia and said as governor he would bring new industry to the state, push for high-speed trains between the state's cities, boost the use of renewable energy, and make it easier for localities to raise funds to meet growing transportation needs. McAuliffe will face state Sen. **Creigh Deeds** and former state Rep. **Brian Moran** in the June 9 Democratic Primary. Meanwhile, Moran challenged his opponents to refuse to accept campaign contributions from out-of-state donors, a barb aimed at McAuliffe, who successful raising money nationwide for the Democratic Party.

? **Reid Praises McConnell.** Last week Senate Majority Leader **Harry Reid** (D-NV) made a speech on the Senate floor noting that Minority Leader **Mitch McConnell** (R-KY) had become Kentucky's longest serving US Senator. Although the first three paragraphs were about Democrat **Wendell Ford**, the lawmaker who had previously held the Bluegrass record, Reid did get around to making nice about McConnell, to wit: "We respect each other's commitment to making our country stronger, and I think we have a special understanding of the unique challenges of keeping our respective caucuses together and striving toward the same goals." McConnell was first elected to the US Senate in 1984.

? **South Carolina: Ford for Governor.** Charleston state Sen. **Robert Ford** (D) has announced that he will run for governor of the Palmetto State in 2010. Ford, 60, is an African American who has served in the state Senate for 15 years. He is best known for his successful efforts to forge the compromise that removed the Confederate flag from the state capitol dome, but left it on the state capitol grounds. Ford's most recent legislative initiative was introduction of a bill to make cursing in public a felony punishable by \$5,000 or up to five years in jail. In the 2008 Democratic presidential primary, he supported **Hillary Clinton** over **Barack Obama**. Ford proposes to legalize video poker again, but would tax it heavily to bring in some \$750 million a year in new revenues. In his announcement, he said he's establishing a coalition of "people who love gaming, state employees who need a major raise in salary and school districts starving for cash."