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A senator in the 'no'

Some years back, a newspaper comic strip showed lemmings running toward a cliff. One said to another, "Don't worry, this was a bipartisan decision."

That, in a nutshell, is how Washington sometimes works.

As long as both parties agree to an idea, everyone assumes the idea must be correct.

Even if it's not.

Consider spending.

For more than a decade the Republican Party controlled the purse strings in Congress.

Spending soared during those years, jumping by one third between 2000 and 2006 under a Republican president.

Ah, but big federal spending, while it may be taking our country over a cliff, enjoys wide bipartisan support.

Since taking over Congress two years ago, the Democratic leadership has kept up the pace; our country's debt ceiling was recently raised to its highest level ever.

That's how leaders inside the Beltway operate.

Few elected officials even talk about reducing spending.

Whatever our government spent last year is considered the new floor; spending can't drop below that. Indeed, it must rise.

Lawmakers then fight over how much to increase spending.

Most liberals would prefer to see more spending on welfare and less on homeland security, and most conservatives want to invest more in defense and spend less on social programs.

But you'd be hard-pressed to find many Americans who think our country's problem is that it doesn't spend enough.

Well, the underrepresented majority that wants to see our \$3 trillion dollar budget trimmed a bit has at least one voice in Congress these days: Tom Coburn, Republican from Oklahoma.

He's nicknamed "Dr. No" —and with good reason.

This year, Coburn's used the Senate's arcane rules to block dozens of spending measures that, in the estimation of the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office, would have cost taxpayers more than \$10 billion.

He simply refuses to go along.

"For those of you who may not know this," Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid has said, "you cannot negotiate with Coburn."

Even trying to convince the Oklahoman to agree to more wasteful spending is, in Reid's words, "a waste of time."

But that's exactly the point.

Coburn has earned his nickname because he can't be bought off by the prospect of more federal largesse for his state.

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He won't play the usual Washington game.

Many of the programs he opposes are politically popular —such as more funding for unsolved civil rights crimes, a national registry for ALS victims and more money to prosecute child pornographers.

But he blocks them because they merely duplicate what the government is already doing.

"If we pass a new program, we either ought to get rid of the old program, or we ought to make it to where it blends with this other one so it's effective," Coburn told The Washington Post. "Almost everything that they've offered has a duplicate program out there that they're not either eliminating or changing."

Coburn, audaciously, wants to change the way Washington operates.

As the Senate was preparing to recess for the summer, Reid tried to outfox Coburn by combining 35 bills Coburn has blocked into one massive spending bill, nicknamed the "Tomnibus" bill (because wide-ranging spending bills are "omnibus" bills).

Coburn countered by offering to lift his blocks on the new spending, if the Senate would also eliminate some \$45 billion in federal waste that Coburn and his staff had identified.

Reid refused to consider the spending reductions, because he was playing by Washington's usual rules.

But those rules don't work anymore — if they ever did.

If they change, it'll be because of stalwart senators such as Tom Coburn.

Thank you, Dr. No.

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