Senator Coburn To Demand Budget Offsets For His Own State's Disaster Relief, Moore Resident Conservative Congressman Tom Cole Will Beg to Differ

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Michael Matthew Bloomer, May 21, 2013

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Senator Coburn says "What's the rush?"[/caption]

Yesterday, President Obama declared Oklahoma a disaster area thereby making federal funding available to affected individuals in Cleveland, Lincoln, McClain, Oklahoma, and Pottawatomie counties. FEMA immediately followed the declaration with a

factsheet listing those assistance programs available to the area. So far, so good.

Nonetheless, Oklahoma's Senators Tom Coburn and James Indore have routinely opposed disaster relief packages unless offset by cuts elsewhere in the federal budget, and Coburn is already on record to demand the same for Oklahoma tornado relief. CQ Roll Call indicates that "Coburn said he would '"absolutely' demand offsets for any federal aid that Congress provides." Huffington Post reports:

> Coburn spokesman John Hart on Monday evening confirmed that the senator will seek to ensure that any additional funding for tornado disaster relief in Oklahoma be offset by cuts to federal spending elsewhere in the budget. "That's always been his position [to offset disaster aid]," Hart said. "He supported offsets to the bill funding the OKC bombing recovery effort."

Offsets can make sense, of course. Yet, during catastrophic emergencies approving disaster relief and mitigation funds requires swifter decision-making than, let's say, offsetting Senators' increased office expenses. The rule in the U.S. Congress had been to ensure relief funds as quickly as possible - to, in effect, remove partisan politics from intruding. In the muddy wake of the present-day GOP, however, the general welfare of Oklahomans may have to await the accountants and penny-pinchers spreadsheets, as Superstorm Sandy victims did.

Both Coburn and Inhofe opposed Hurricane Sandy relief for a variety of reasons, Coburn calling much of the relief bill "wasteful spending." And while a reading of his objections does make one wonder about some of the "add ons," the need for swift action was then apparent. In addition, isn't it interesting how Republican wing nuts cry "Foul!" whenever others try to add their own priorities to proposed legislation despite their own

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Oklahoma Senator Tom Coburn - "I will not gladly pay you Tuesday for a tent today."[/caption]

consistent efforts to do so during, among other instances, budget and debt ceiling negotiations?

Coburn and Inhofe did much to help the GOP cause to delay Hurricane Sandy relief. Likewise in 2011 both Oklahoma senators opposed emergency FEMA funding. And this from representatives of one of two states that accounted for 25% of FEMA spending since 2009.

Senator Coburn issued a statement today regarding yesterday's tornadoes. In its most relevant section, it's a bit ambiguous:

> “I spoke with Department of Homeland Secretary Janet Napolitano last night about FEMA’s response. We still don’t know the scope of devastation and won’t for some time. But, as the ranking member of Senate committee that oversees FEMA, I can assure Oklahomans that any and all available aid will be delivered without delay."

"I can assure Oklahomans that any and all *available* aid will be delivered without delay." It's that word "available" that's troubling. There is not enough "available" federal aid, and everyone knows it. Hurricane Sandy, remember? The damage in Oklahoma may well require tens of billions, and although Coburn's Senate website announces "Nonprofits lead charge to help tornado victims," their assistance will not be enough, by a longshot. It's likely that a supplemental appropriation will be required to add to the amount of "available aid." So, in his heartfelt message to Oklahomans, the Senator cannot bring himself to promise that a supplemental appropriation will be forthcoming without delay.

Hopefully, whatever supplemental funds required for the Oklahoma tornadoes will push aside the upcoming opposition in the House and Senate. Here it bears noting the thoughts of Congressman Tom Cole, who represents Oklahoma's 4th congressional district, home to Moore, now hit with its second devastating tornado since 1999, and the site of many other lesser tornadoes. Raised in Moore, Mr. Cole, a rigid conservative, still lives there with his wife Ellen and their son Mason. So, he, above all others, knows the impact of tornadoes on the flat geography of Moore. He'd seen it all. Or so he thought until yesterday. This morning he observed:

> “I never thought I’d see anything worse than I saw in 1999, this is our fourth [tornado] in 15 years,” the Oklahoma Republican said Tuesday on *Morning Joe*. “This is even worse in terms of loss of life, and I’ve been talking to friends and family and officials on the ground and that number is gonna get worse.”

Cole was the GOP House floor manager of the Hurricane Sandy debate. Despite his conservative resume, he supported that relief, unlike many in his party.[1. He also bolted from Speaker Boehner by supporting President Obama's fiscal cliff proposal.] During that debate he had this to say:

> As an American and as an Oklahoman, I know that my State has often benefited from Federal disaster relief in the past. I think of the Oklahoma City bombing in particular, where I served as Secretary of State and chief liaison to the Federal Government, and know firsthand how critical it is and how helpful it is to have the resources of the Federal Government at hand when you're dealing with an unanticipated disaster.
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> Again, it's pretty unusual in my State to go through a year without a tornado disaster, and it's pretty unusual to go through a year without a drought disaster. Each time, we've come and asked for help from the Federal Government; each time, we received that help. Undoubtedly, we'll be doing that again in the near future. It would be hypocritical, in my view, to fail to do for people in the affected region what I and, I know, many others have routinely asked for our own regions.
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> I do think, as I look forward, we should do a better job in budgeting for disasters, and frankly, we've taken steps in that direction. To the credit of this body and the executive branch, under the Budget Control Act, we actually set aside money for disaster relief; and had we not had the disaster of Hurricane Sandy, we would have actually finished the year with a surplus in that account. This disaster, though, was so large and so sweeping that it used all that surplus and still demands more.
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> So going forward, I hope we can look at different mechanisms to budget in a more responsible and consistent manner. However, to not allow whatever shortcomings are in the mechanisms of disaster relief, to stand by and allow Americans to suffer while we sort all that through, we have never done that in the past during a disaster, we certainly shouldn't do so now.

Well and poignantly said. From your mouth to Coburn's ears, Congressman.