

Opening Statement of Senator Tom A. Coburn, M.D.

Hearing on
“The Costs and Impacts of Crisis Budgeting”

Wednesday, March 13, 2013

Over the last four years, the nation has watched our government fumble its way from budget crisis to budget crisis. In the last six months alone, we’ve faced down the Fiscal Cliff and Sequestration. In two weeks, if we fail to pass a new budget we face a government shutdown. Americans no doubt look at the government and wonder what is going on.

Will Rogers, a great Oklahoman once said, “I don’t make jokes. I just watch the government and report the facts.” Only, government dysfunction is no laughing matter.

In recent decades, Congress and the Administration have failed spectacularly to hit expected budgeting deadlines with any kind of regularity. Most deadlines are in law and designed to ensure sound and predictable handling of taxpayers’ money. Yet, Washington politicians have routinely ignored them.

If anybody wonders how our national debt has come to top \$16.8 trillion, consider the following. Despite the nation’s budgetary problems, the president’s budget submission is 37 days late today. The president is not expected to formally issue his budget until April 8th – more than two months after the legal deadline.

Congress is not faring any better than the White House. While the Budget Act specifies that the Senate Budget Committee is to report a budget resolution by April 1st, the Senate has not passed the budget resolution on time in 16 of the last 20 years.

What’s more, in 18 of the last 20 years, Congress has failed to pass and send to the president *all* of its appropriations bills on time.

In the absence of timely and long-term budgets and appropriations, Congress has become reliant on Continuing Resolutions, such as the one on the Senate floor this week. Continuing Resolutions simply keep the government running, and have been used in some form in all but four years out of a 61-year period from fiscal years 1952 to 2012.

Conventional wisdom says results like these must mean the system is broken. I think we need to challenge conventional wisdom by instead looking to our Constitution.

In the Constitution, we find a process designed to make it hard for the government to pass anything into law. This includes our annual budgets. But, just because something is hard does not make it impossible – nor does it mean the results should be so poor.

I would instead suggest that our problems with budget uncertainty stem from other places.

First, the government is too big, and spends too much money. Partisans may dismiss this as an ideological point, but it is not. Our government will soon spend \$4 trillion a year just to keep the doors open – this is simply too much for Congress to understand. As a result, we are now locked in a battle over taxing and spending that has so many moving parts the ability to find agreement is proving difficult.

Second, Congress doesn't do oversight – or at least not much. Career politicians interested only in re-election overlook all of the areas in which the government wastes our money. Calls for reform, even when they come from independent and non-partisan sources like the GAO or inspectors general, are met with cries that “the sky is falling.”

In general, Congress has the least amount of trouble agreeing to spend more taxpayer money. We see this every year when each budget is larger than the last – even under sequestration.

Congress must begin to immediately change its culture. It must begin putting the greater good over the parochial and political. Congress and the White House must quit delaying enactment of the hard and specific budgetary and appropriation decisions that will put the country on the path to long-term fiscal health. Crisis budgeting will never provide the predictability necessary for a thriving economic environment.

We can and should do better.