Coburn Dines Alone as the Senate Buffet Piles on the Pork

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By Dana Milbank

Tom Coburn is like an imam at a pig roast: He sees pork everywhere, and he doesn't like it.

The Republican senator from Oklahoma has spent the past week trying to remove pet-project "earmarks" that his colleagues have added to an emergency spending bill -- and the earmarks are winning, big time.

Yesterday morning, he was out on the Senate floor demanding to know why the emergency legislation -- for Iraq, Afghanistan and Gulf Coast hurricane recovery -- includes millions of dollars for Hawaiian sugar growers.

He stepped out for a break on a Senate balcony and pointed to the work on the Capitol Visitor Center, which may get another $27 million in emergency spending. "That's another one!" he fumed.

After lunch, he returned to the Senate floor to try to kill earmarks for a defense contractor, a study of shrimp and reef fishery profitability, aircraft that weren't requested by the Pentagon and other items in the groaning, $106.5 billion spending package.

"I thought it would be interesting for us to just spend a minute to think about what a billion is," he proposed. "A billion minutes ago, Jesus was alive . . . A billion days ago, no one walked on Earth on two feet." But, he added, "A billion dollars ago was only eight hours and 20 minutes at the rate we're spending money in the federal government."

The quixotic Coburn, a family doctor by trade and a conservative fire breather by inclination, has no illusions that he'll make a dent in government spending. The earmark-engorged Senate spending bill is $14 billion more than the White House requested and the House passed. So far, Coburn has succeeded in cutting just $15 million of the $2.6 billion he has tried eliminating.

Senators scratch each others' backs: You vote for my earmark, I'll vote for yours.

But the iconoclastic Coburn knows the value of symbolism. (He went through the Capitol metal detector yesterday like an ordinary citizen even though he doesn't have to.) With his 19 amendments to the spending bill, Coburn is trying to embarrass senators so that they think twice before trying audacious earmarks in the future.

"It's all designed to show the absurdity of what's going on," he said during a break in his barrage. And much of it does sound absurd: Why does a war and Gulf Coast spending bill have millions for riverbank erosion in California, a red tide outbreak in New England and a driver's license facility in Georgia?
The famous Coburn fervor, which has made him a demon of the left on abortion and social issues, is now being turned against big spenders in both parties. And his colleagues are seething. Sen. Trent Lott (R-Miss.), found in the hallway between battles with Coburn, said he pleaded with the Oklahoman to cease and desist after his one victory, killing an earmark for seafood promotion. "I said, 'Congratulations, you won one. Now go away,' " Lott recalled.

The day began with a loss by Coburn and his Sancho Panza, Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.), on the Hawaiian sugar earmark. They were vanquished by Sen. Daniel Inouye (D-Hawaii), an old bull who spoke of biblical torrents. "For 40 days and 40 nights, it rained in Hawaii," he said.

Next came Coburn's effort to strip hurricane rebuilding money from a Northrop Grumman facility in Mississippi -- home of Lott and Appropriations Committee Chairman Thad Cochran. "We're really reaching forward and stealing an opportunity from our kids," Coburn pleaded.

"I grew up in the shadow of this shipyard, where 13,000 men and women make their livelihood," Lott countered. "My dad was a pipe fitter in that shipyard."

Coburn stood at the clerk's desk for the roll call and watched his amendment fail, 52 to 47. Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist consoled him with an arm around the shoulder.

The doctor could see the prognosis was not good. He offered to withdraw three other amendments that would have killed earmarks to study shrimp profitability, to boost AmeriCorps community service, and to award the Pentagon more Osprey aircraft than it wants.

The senator still had a little fight left, though. He tried to strike a $176 million earmark for a retirement facility in Mississippi -- again inviting the wrath of Lott and Cochran.

"My concern is the cost," said Coburn, warning that one estimate puts it at "$1 million a room."

"I would plead with my colleague here from Oklahoma to bear with me and work with us on this," Lott implored.

Coburn resisted. "Call me cheap," he offered, unmoved.

But after more pressure, by Cochran, Coburn withdrew the amendment. A little later, he surrendered, somewhat reluctantly, on seven more amendments. "I just withdrew amendments for things I don't agree with," he noted.

It was almost a clean sweep for the earmark proponents, and it was time for Coburn's last stand: cutting an $11 million earmark for erosion control on the Sacramento River in
California, more than 2,000 miles from New Orleans. "Abuse of taxpayer resources!" Coburn complained.

California's senators were ready in opposition, displaying posters and photos. "We could have a real catastrophe," countered Dianne Feinstein (D).

"We're borrowing the money from future generations," Coburn protested.

An indignant Barbara Boxer chided Coburn: "Penny-wise, pound-foolish."

The Senate, generous with both pennies and pounds, called it a night.