

WASHINGTON - For the second time in his career, U.S. Sen. Tom Coburn is doing the unthinkable for most politicians. The Oklahoma Republican is preparing to begin a second six-year term in one of the most exclusive political institutions in the world, and he repeatedly reminds anyone who will listen that it will be his last.

Not only is such early notice unusual for politicians who traditionally do not give up power easily, but John McGlennon, professor of government at the College of William and Mary in Virginia, said it is "even more rare for them to follow through." McGlennon recalls that Coburn followed the same pattern in his three two-year terms in the U.S. House, giving up power without any help from the voters. "That's something that many other term-limits pledgers can't say," he said. Politicians historically wait late in their terms of office before going public with their decisions to retire. Such timing can help preserve clout. Coburn's predecessor, Republican Don Nickles, did not announce his decision forgoing a run for a fifth term in 2004 until October 2003. Republican Henry Bellmon, who held that same seat before Nickles, was expected to run again in 1980 but instead surprised most with an announcement that he was leaving after two terms. Bellmon unleashed that bombshell in January 1979. McGlennon predicted the impact of Coburn's situation will be less because he's a senator. "Unlike an executive - a governor or a president - it is not as if you have a lot of control over the policy process and the distribution of government resources that might make it matter more," he said. "And in a lot of ways, I think he can treat his next six years as somewhat liberated over concerns over the next election." So, what would a liberated Tom Coburn do? A review of the last time he term-limited himself out of office could provide a few clues. At the beginning of his last term in the House in 1999, Coburn rejected the term lame duck and described himself as "more intense than ever." Later that year, he launched a filibuster by amendment against a major agriculture spending bill even though

technically the House, unlike the Senate, does not have the filibuster; continued to work on major legislation; and used his clout as one of the few physicians in Congress to go after the American Medical Association for endorsing condom distribution in schools. In 2000, Coburn picked a major fight over that year's census and urged his then-2nd District constituents to violate federal law by refusing to complete their questionnaires. He also won House approval of his bill to change the way the federal government approaches its fight against AIDS. In his first term in the Senate, Coburn earned the moniker of "Dr. No" for using that chamber's rules and customs to stop or slow down action. McGlennon said that historically the term lame duck has been applied to those who were defeated for re-election but still served for a short period. "I think we refer to people making themselves lame ducks, but they really haven't," he said, citing Coburn's voluntary decision to leave office on his own terms. McGlennon said lame ducks or term-limited members are viewed to their detriment as unable to get anything done. That view, he said, might not apply to someone whose "objective is to reduce the amount of things that the government is doing, and you don't really worry about who you are alienating." Jim Myers (202) 484-1424