

Oklahoma has a spending problem, too.

BY BRANDON DUTCHER | Published: June 22, 2012

Columnist Mark Steyn has memorably noted that “the government of the United States is broker than any entity has ever been in the history of the planet. Officially, Washington has to return \$15 trillion just to get back to having nothing at all.” What’s more, Steyn says, “that \$15 trillion is a very lowball figure that conveniently ignores another \$100 trillion in unfunded liabilities that the government, unlike private businesses, is able to keep off the books.”

In his important new book “The Debt Bomb,” U.S. Sen. Tom Coburn shares a quote from Adm. Mike Mullen, former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff under President Obama: “Our national debt is our biggest national security threat.” University of Oklahoma historian J. Rufus Fears made similar remarks last year at a talk at the Oklahoma Council of Public Affairs, issuing a stern rebuke to politicians whose reckless borrowing-and-spending spree leaves us at the mercy of xenophobic despots who hate us.

The politicians in Washington have failed us. But the ones here at home are also part of the problem. Oklahoma state government spending is at an all-time high. Total state spending continues to increase every year (analysts at liberal and conservative think tanks in Oklahoma agree on this point). Much of this is federal money.

Cato Institute analyst Tad DeHaven, a former budget policy adviser to Coburn, says state policymakers have become “dangerously reliant on federal money.” In a very real sense, Oklahoma policymakers get federal bailouts every year. They either don’t know or don’t care that, as Coburn says, “America is already bankrupt.”

And what are all these federal bailouts accomplishing? What government spending is so important that it justifies borrowing all this money from China?

One of the chief culprits fueling our national debt — and our Oklahoma spending spree — is Medicaid. Arguably the worst health care program in the country, Medicaid is “a disaster for low-income patients,” Coburn says. In his book, he cites several examples of Medicaid harming the poor, and says we need to be “protecting the poor from government.”

But instead, Oklahoma policymakers have managed to get more people into the program — even resorting to gimmicks and tax hikes to do so. Spend, spend, spend — even though former Medicaid boss Donald Berwick acknowledges that 20 to 30 percent of health spending is “waste.”

It’s one thing to want to help the truly needy. But policymakers spend our money blithely, not bothering to distinguish between the deserving poor and the undeserving poor. Oklahoma spends millions of dollars each year bribing mothers not to marry the fathers of their children. Food stamp felons conduct business openly on Twitter. No matter. Politicians just keep spending money we don’t have. Coburn has identified the problem in Washington: Careerist politicians, seduced by power and position, refuse to set priorities because cutting spending isn’t truly important to them.

We have the identical problem in Oklahoma City.

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