

Coburn: A convention of states can restore our Constitution

Tom Coburn 11:51 a.m. EDT April 29, 2015

Our out-of-control federal government knows no limits. States have the power to put it right.



(Photo: Molly Riley, AP)

From the very beginning of our country, Americans have wrestled with how best to govern ourselves within the framework of the Constitution. Do we want a strong federal government, or a weaker one? Do we want decisions made closer to home, or in a faraway capital? Does the Constitution itself mean what it says, or have interpretations over time stripped it of its original meaning?

Republicans and Democrats in Congress and in the White House have agreed time and time again to keep spending more money we do not have to pay for things we do not need.

Today our national debt exceeds [\\$18 trillion](http://blogs.wsj.com/economics/2015/02/01/qa-what-the-18-trillion-national-debt-means-for-the-u-s-economy/) (<http://blogs.wsj.com/economics/2015/02/01/qa-what-the-18-trillion-national-debt-means-for-the-u-s-economy/>) which equates to more than \$220,000 for a [family of four](http://www.census.gov/popclock/) (<http://www.census.gov/popclock/>). That's in excess of \$30,000 more than the [median home price](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/03/13/median-home-price-2014_n_4957604.html) (http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/03/13/median-home-price-2014_n_4957604.html) in this country. In other words, Washington has saddled every family in the country with a debt far exceeding their own home before they've even gotten out of bed in the morning, and that's before we even get to the \$127 trillion in [unfunded liabilities](http://www.forbes.com/sites/realspin/2014/01/17/you-think-the-deficit-is-bad-federal-unfunded-liabilities-exceed-127-trillion/) (<http://www.forbes.com/sites/realspin/2014/01/17/you-think-the-deficit-is-bad-federal-unfunded-liabilities-exceed-127-trillion/>) that faces our children and grandchildren.



USA TODAY

[Bipartisan buds won't survive a frost: Column](http://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2015/04/21/congress-job-deal-bipartisanship-column/26077117/)

[\(http://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2015/04/21/congress-job-deal-bipartisanship-column/26077117/\)](http://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2015/04/21/congress-job-deal-bipartisanship-column/26077117/)

At the same time, the federal government is reaching into every area of American life in ways previously unthinkable: federal takeovers of [banking](http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=102384657) (<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=102384657>) and [student loans](http://www.sfgate.com/business/networth/article/Feds-take-over-student-loan-program-from-banks-3193888.php) (<http://www.sfgate.com/business/networth/article/Feds-take-over-student-loan-program-from-banks-3193888.php>), costly [bailouts](http://theweek.com/articles/454749/auto-bailout-officially-over-heres-what-america-lost-gained) (<http://theweek.com/articles/454749/auto-bailout-officially-over-heres-what-america-lost-gained>) of the auto industry and burdensome [regulation](http://www.nationaljournal.com/technology/a-federal-court-just-rewrote-the-rules-for-the-internet-what-does-that-mean-for-you-20140115) (<http://www.nationaljournal.com/technology/a-federal-court-just-rewrote-the-rules-for-the-internet-what-does-that-mean-for-you-20140115>) of the internet, reams of new regulation put on the books [every single day](http://spectator.org/articles/55475/twenty-years-non-stop-regulation) (<http://spectator.org/articles/55475/twenty-years-non-stop-regulation>), not to mention a health care law so onerous and complex that [it had to be passed](http://www.politico.com/livepulse/0310/Pelosi_People_wont_appreciate_reform_until_it_passes.html) (http://www.politico.com/livepulse/0310/Pelosi_People_wont_appreciate_reform_until_it_passes.html) before it was even read.

The president has admitted [numerous times](http://www.speaker.gov/general/22-times-president-obama-said-he-couldn-t-ignore-or-create-his-own-immigration-law) (<http://www.speaker.gov/general/22-times-president-obama-said-he-couldn-t-ignore-or-create-his-own-immigration-law>) he did not have the legal authority to impose executive amnesty yet the Congress [relinquished](http://www.houstonpublicmedia.org/news/congress-funds-obamas-executive-action-what-does-that-mean-for-houston/) (<http://www.houstonpublicmedia.org/news/congress-funds-obamas-executive-action-what-does-that-mean-for-houston/>) its check and balance opportunity and funded it. Just [last month](http://www.nationalreview.com/bench-memos/415015/7-best-moments-oral-argument-king-v-burwell-jonathan-keim) (<http://www.nationalreview.com/bench-memos/415015/7-best-moments-oral-argument-king-v-burwell-jonathan-keim>), the Supreme Court heard a case that will decide whether Obamacare means something different from the text Congress passed and the president signed.

Now ask yourself this question: no matter who is in charge, will Washington ever rein itself in? More than 200 years of history tell us no.

Fortunately, the Founders knew their history and provided the people a safeguard against the tendency of government to consolidate power and authority. It is built into the Constitution in [Article V](http://www.archives.gov/federal-register/constitution/article-v.html) (<http://www.archives.gov/federal-register/constitution/article-v.html>). It provides a mechanism for the states to call a convention to consider specific amendments to the Constitution. A [convention of states](http://www.conventionofstates.com/) (<http://www.conventionofstates.com/>) could consider only that which the states authorize, including measures to ensure fiscal restraint and other curbs on federal power.



USA TODAY

[Atlanta's cheating teachers are not mobsters: Column](http://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2015/04/20/atlanta-teachers-cheating-tests-overcriminalization-column/25952505/)

[\(http://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2015/04/20/atlanta-teachers-cheating-tests-overcriminalization-column/25952505/\)](http://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2015/04/20/atlanta-teachers-cheating-tests-overcriminalization-column/25952505/)

Over time, the federal government has usurped the power reserved to the states in the Constitution and recast the relationship between Americans and their government. What was once a system of government that made decisions close to the people has been replaced by decision making by unnamed bureaucrats and entrenched politicians in a faraway capital with little real input from the people themselves — especially those not represented by a high-dollar lobbyist.

It's time to return government to the people and realize again our Founders' vision for government closer to the people. I have enormous faith in the common sense of the American people. Americans know what's best for them and for their children, so all they need is the voice in their own government that was envisioned at the dawn of our republic. A convention of states is the ultimate constitutional remedy for out-of-control government.

After many years in Washington, one of the reasons I left is because I no longer believe that Washington is capable of reining itself in. It is a perpetual racket that must be changed and the only avenue to change it is the one given to us by our Founders in the Constitution — an Article V convention of states where the people, not the politicians, are in charge.

Tom Coburn is a former U.S. Senator from Oklahoma.

In addition to its own editorials, USA TODAY publishes diverse opinions from outside writers, including our [Board of Contributors \(/reporters/boc.html\)](#). To read more columns like this, go to the [Opinion front page \(/opinion/\)](#).

Read or Share this story: <http://usat.ly/1GFw4xQ>