



Coffman finds "different role" as congressman compared with former Colorado state office

By Allison Sherry, *The Denver Post*

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WASHINGTON — In the past two months, U.S. Rep. Mike Coffman has tried to get the Obama administration to pull the Peace Corps out of China and has signed onto a letter that would yank funding for a new United Nations building.

He wants to remove the requirement that counties with large populations of Latino voters furnish ballots in Spanish and — just last week — introduced legislation that would cut all economic and military aid to Pakistan until the administration can prove that it's not going to help groups linked to al-Qaeda.

In other words, the Aurora Republican who used to be a genial pat-on-the-back Colorado secretary of state, a man who had a dog walking around his office, is carving out a narrow isolationist niche for himself in the GOP's House majority.

"It's a different role," Coffman said, when asked whether he has changed as a politician. "I think inherently this position is different in the sense you have such a broad array of policies."

That said, Coffman does not believe the hot-button issues — those that get the biggest rise from people — are that important in the long run. (His Peace Corps idea sparked a national letter-writing campaign from former Corps volunteers to their respective members of Congress.)

"I don't regard these as significant in the context of the issues we're working on," Coffman said. "It may be significant in the press."

He views his work on cutting the Department of Defense budget and his chairmanship on the Balanced Budget Amendment caucus as much more important to the country's well-being.

But by picking boutique issues, and enjoying the publicity, he is casting an image to those paying attention as the guy who isn't afraid to pick fights, even minor ones, or roil members of his own party.

Among his congressional friends, he has proposed getting rid of their pensions and delivering them pay cuts. While neither of those ideas has gone anywhere, his plan to cut congressional office budgets was passed in the August deal to raise the nation's debt ceiling.

On the House Armed Services Committee — where he says he has the most diverse military background of any member — Coffman is pitching \$103 billion in cuts to defense spending over 10 years.

"He's trying to cover all the bases. He's appealing to Republicans with his interest in withdrawing pensions and then trying to appeal to maybe the left by withdrawing funding for Pakistan," said state Sen. Nancy Spence, a Republican from Coffman's district. "I think he's trying to have it both ways right now and be visible about it. I think it's smart politics."

University of Denver political scientist Seth Masket also called Coffman's moves strategically — and politically — helpful.

"He wants to distinguish himself among the issue activists out there, the ones who will decide whether he faces a challenger or not," Masket said. "Now is the time to try and speak their language. The language of general voters can wait until general voters are paying attention."

For his part, Coffman says the most important issues facing his constituents are "jobs and the economy" and that Congress' 14 percent approval rating was richly deserved.

He said he is working on trying to loosen capital markets so small businesses can obtain more credit to grow.

He also meets with GOP leadership regularly to push a Balanced Budget Amendment that he says would solve the problem of Congress' overspending.

"Fundamentally, I think the power has to be stripped away from Congress to spend money we don't have," he said. "I think we have gone in the wrong direction. . . . I think the American people ought to be angry."

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