

Tom Cotton: a boy from Dardanelle

Arkansas's junior U.S. senator is a happy contrarian who advances a vision of our democracy and foreign policy that beckons power brokers and diplomats.

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DARDANELLE — Many have said much, personally and under the banners of mastheads and networks, about the nation's youngest senator, 38-year-old Tom Cotton. Sometimes the conversation is about his ambition — how, with no political experience, he was elected to the House of Representatives in 2012, how he bounced easily to the Senate in 2014, and where he'll land next.

Sometimes it's about his persona, which *U.S. News & World Report* has criticized as “wooden and academic,” although at times he displays a tense alertness that could be taken as combative. (In congressional hearings and on news shows, Cotton sits ramrod straight or strains forward, knitting his eyebrows, wetting his lips, forming a tight — bemused? encouraging? — smile, while questions are asked or answered.) Often it's about his recalcitrant behavior and bold rhetoric, which have earned accolades and criticism.

In April 2015, on a Family Research Council radio show, Cotton advocated blowing up Iranian nuclear facilities, just after publishing an open letter to the leaders of Iran in an attempt to undermine President Barack Obama's nuclear deal. He doesn't consider water-boarding torture and, in an Armed Services Committee hearing, said “every last one” of the Guantanamo Bay detainees “can rot in hell.”

He has linked ISIS with Mexican drug cartels (later discredited by the *Washington Post*) and suggested that this alliance is a threat to Arkansas. At a Hot Springs town hall in 2013, he responded to a question about the Affordable Care Act with, “I certainly wouldn't put [in] my Social Security number ... until I'm 100 percent confident it's not going to be stolen by Russian mobsters.” Last spring he asked constituents fighting the Religious Freedom Restoration Act to “have a sense of perspective,” because “in Iran they hang you for the crime of being gay.”

Cotton's words, more than his bills or voting record, render him as polarizing as President Obama and nearly as controversial as Donald Trump. But on a sunny Saturday morning in Dardanelle (pop. 4,700), it's difficult to imagine this beanpole of a man in a crisp button-down and belted jeans as anything other than personable. In a tidy red brick-and-siding two-story nestled among rolling hills, cow ponds and barns,

he sits behind a table draped with a floral cloth and drains, on average, one cup of coffee every 40 minutes.

“That’s the front field, where we kept cows who were sick or pregnant,” says Cotton, the progeny of seven generations of Yell County families, gesturing out a picture window that frames a distant Mount Nebo and splashes light across the ’70s-style paneling of his childhood home.

Cotton’s narrative is consistent, often down to the phrasing used to relay it. He discovered his political convictions at 16, during the first year of his former governor’s presidency, when Bill Clinton raised income tax and pulled out of Mogadishu. He was spurred to join the U.S. Army by 9/11, although he first took law jobs to pay off Harvard loans. After a tour in Iraq and one in Afghanistan, politicians and legislators urged him to run for Congress.

Cotton describes his early years in idyllic terms. His father, Len, raised beef cattle and his mother, Avis, taught home economics and later took night classes at the University of Central Arkansas, becoming principal of Dardanelle Middle School. Cotton spent summer days in town, at his grandmother’s and great-aunt’s houses, playing video games and riding bikes with the neighborhood kids.

As a 6-foot-5 teenager, he co-captained the Sand Lizards basketball team and, under the influence of an admired history teacher, developed a fetish for biographies and “politics and warfare ... the development of human civilization and the nation state, diplomatic foreign relations and international political development.” When he graduated from Dardanelle High School in 1995, Cotton moved to Massachusetts to study political science at Harvard College. He hasn’t lived in Dardanelle full time since.

“Tom wasn’t daunted by being part of a political minority. He actually took on the challenge of articulating conservatism,” says Adam Kovacevich, Google’s director of U.S. public policy and Cotton’s Harvard classmate.

As an undergraduate, Cotton wrote nearly two dozen editorials for *The Harvard Crimson*. They include odes to Winston Churchill and the Ryder Cup golf tournament, criticisms of libertarianism and then-president Clinton, a scathing piece about “the remarkable inroads made into sports by liberal compassion, the only virtue acknowledged in our society today,” and a brief note encouraging “a capitalist approach to restaurants in the Square” to make room for “McDonald’s and Taco Bell.” (The piece proved prophetic. These days, Harvard Square is a surfeit of chain retail.)

One editorial, “Promises and Covenants,” made media rounds in 2013 for promoting covenant marriages (legally difficult to end and available in only three states), ridiculing feminism (on a related note, Cotton doesn’t support women in combat) and concluding that women’s biggest fear is divorce.

“I’ve learned a lot more about the world,” Cotton says, “but I wouldn’t say I’ve had foundational changes.”

Nor is he given to false modesty. He believes his father, a Vietnam veteran, raised him to be a leader. He enrolled in the infantry “to lead men in combat.” In politics, he has never been afraid to cast a lone vote.

“He’s very self-possessed ... and doesn’t need adulation in order to feel valued,” Kovacevich says.

Cotton once wrote about a panel discussion he joined his last year of college: “After my opening remarks, another participant called me ‘contrarian.’ That I did not intend my remarks to sound eccentric or esoteric yet still received this label especially pleased me.”

CLOAKED IN CAMO

After graduating from Harvard Law, Cotton spent a year clerking for a Reagan-appointed Appeals Court judge. Then, over the next 18 months, he worked for two private firms in D.C., one of which — Cooper & Kirk, PLLC — self-labels as “the go-to firm to sue the federal government.” In 2005 Cotton traded the office for infantry. “Most people he knew from college ... would ask the question, ‘Why are you doing this? ... You can be a law firm partner, maybe be a judge’ ... and he could have run for office with that background as well,” Kovacevich says. “But he was extremely patriotic.”

Cotton’s drill sergeant, George Norton, describes a single-minded soldier who ran extra laps, coached those who fell behind and shined boots while peers lounged. “He had all the right answers, all of the time,” Norton says. (Norton appeared in a 2014 campaign ad but has “no opinion” on Cotton’s politics.)

In 2006 Cotton was deployed to Iraq as a junior officer. He spent his first tour leading about 35 soldiers in a daily patrol of a Baghdad neighborhood. There were ghastly scenes — “You’d find bodies out on the street that had been tortured, burned, electric drill marks, decapitated,” he says. Once an explosion disabled his Humvee.

During this first tour, Cotton publicly distinguished himself not by a military endeavor, but with a letter he wrote to the *New York Times*, which the paper declined to publish. Instead it was published by Power Line blog, drawing the attention of right-wing politicians.

“Congratulations on disclosing our government’s highly-classified anti-terrorist financing program!” Cotton wrote, the sarcasm reminiscent of his *Crimson* editorials. He claimed that the *Times* “endanger[ed] the lives” of his soldiers and violated “espionage laws” with a story about a secret program to disrupt terrorist funding. He

cited his Harvard Law degree before ending with, “By the time we return home, maybe you will be in your rightful place: not at the Pulitzer announcements, but behind bars.” The letter incensed his superiors, but Cotton says the anger abated in the wake of a note from then-Army chief of staff Pete Schoomaker, praising the young officer’s focus on security.

“As an officer, there’s more room for open discussion,” Cotton says. “There’s a notion ... that’s not fully accurate, that just because they [other officers] outranked me, I had to do what they said.”

MAN AROUND TOWN

“I don’t know if many people would describe him as chill and laid-back, but he was when he was little-bitty,” says Cotton’s older sister, Sarah Patterson, a partner with Friday, Eldridge & Clark. “He’s very family-oriented. ... He’s the United States senator second. Or third or fourth or fifth, actually.”

Trent Tipton, 45, coached Cotton in summer basketball, and they used to watch bowl games together on Harvard breaks. “His vocabulary may have been better than most of ours, but other than that, he was pretty normal,” Tipton says.

Cotton describes himself as “thick-skinned” and “even-tempered,” qualities he attributes to his father’s reactionary tendency and his mother’s imperturbability. (During nine weeks of basic training, Norton “never saw Tom Cotton get upset.” Tipton recalls a single instance when, angry at a referee’s call, Cotton slammed the basketball to the floor. It rebounded and popped him in the nose.)

Driven by public service, Cotton planned to be a prosecutor — in his words, “to put the bad guys away.”

“He’s interested in advancing a vision of the country’s future and the appropriate role government should play ... not in being a senator for life,” Kovacevich says.

Cotton simply does what he thinks is right. “It’s often the popular thing, otherwise you wouldn’t get elected in the first place. But you do [the right thing] in a way that is respectful and sensitive to the concerns of the minority,” he says.

Many of his childhood stories involve his father, and they paint a more complex picture than the 14-minute campaign ad, “Dardanelle Boys Always Come Home,” which portrays Len as a folksy farmer calling high school football games.

Len could be short-tempered. When he was 13, Cotton rammed a truck into his parents’ bedroom wall. He had been trying to move the truck to mow the lawn, but Len had forgotten to mention that the brakes were out. The truck burst through the roll-down garage door, movie-style, bumping to rest against the wall. When Len surveyed the damage, he shouted until Avis interceded.

“It was one of those times that I want to thank my mother for intervening out of my earshot, to remind him that this was all his fault,” Cotton says.

This memory coexists with another: the time Cotton saw his father stop a Little League game and ask the other team’s coach to apologize to a player’s father, after the coach directed a racial slur toward the man.

“He could have let that comment go. Not everyone on the team had heard it ... but he stopped the game and righted that wrong.”

Cotton can’t recall his parents ever arguing in front of their children. This united front is a tenet he hopes to practice in his own marriage to Anna Peckham Cotton, a Central Intelligence Agency lawyer from Nebraska.

In January 2013, Larry Arnn — a fellow Arkansan and a Heritage Foundation board member — sent Anna to a luncheon where the freshly minted representative was speaking. She passed Cotton her number. After their initial date at an upscale steakhouse, Cotton called his sister to report that he’d found his future wife.

“When I met her, I thought she was very beautiful. ... As we were first texting, then talking on the phone, I liked more and more what I was learning about her,” Cotton says. It was his first serious relationship.

A month later Anna visited Arkansas, even though Len thought it was too soon for her to meet the family. On that trip, Cotton told Anna that he loved her. Taken aback, she responded with a polite, “Oh, thank you.”

Patterson could tell from that first visit that her brother “adores Anna,” whom she describes as “smart, very calm, nurturing, pleasant. ... You know those people who are just genuinely happy most of the time?”

In March 2014, the Cottons were married at The Greenbrier — a West Virginia resort built in 1778, notable because it has a Cold War-era bunker large enough to house all of Congress. Their son, Gabriel, turns 1 this month.

TOM COTTON EATS BIRTHDAY CAKE EVERY DAY

He jogs most mornings in order to indulge this habit, he told *the New York Times* in April 2015. Like nearly everything Cotton says, the tidbit became media fodder, satirized by the *Washington Post* and other sites (“Things Tom Cotton Likes: War and Birthday Cake,” from the Bob & Chez Show podcast) and generally passed around the Internet on wonkish blogs.

But — little-known fact — Cotton also owns a FryDaddy. Or at least, he once did. And according to Kovacevich, he can make fried chicken in it. When the two were

housemates during D.C.-based internships, the Californian was mystified by the “plug-in hot pot of grease.”

These days Kovacevich, a self-described Democrat, is sometimes mystified by his friend’s inflexible political stances, but that doesn’t keep him from admiring the man behind the politics. “He’s serious about ideas, but that doesn’t make him humorless. ... He appreciates absurdity,” Kovacevich says.

Tipton, who has always lived in the Arkansas River Valley, doesn’t pay much attention to politics or absurdity. “You get what you get with Tom,” he says.