



Written by [Joe Wolverton, II, J.D.](#) on May 4, 2015

The Founders' View on Sen. Tom Cotton's Fascination With War

Senator Tom Cotton (shown, R-Ark.) has a history of hawkishness and is accused of "lov[ing] war a little too much" in a recent article.

In a [detailed exposé](#) of the militaristic motives of Senator Cotton, Philip Weiss claims that the war veteran and Senate neophyte is not new to the promotion of combat as a foreign policy plank.

Weiss provides evidence that Cotton is an "uber-hawk" who was "scripted by neoconservative Bill Kristol." Kristol's PAC and his family bankrolled Cotton's campaign against Mark Pryor when the going got tough, Weiss documents. He then goes on to chronicle Cotton's substantial neocon background and bona fides:



The neoconservatives reached out and groomed Tom Cotton when they saw him coming down the pike. The Harvard College and Harvard Law grad spent just one term in the Congress before challenging and defeating Mark Pryor last fall. And he got tons of money then from the Israel lobby.

Neoconservative *Washington Post* columnist Jennifer Rubin embraced Cotton back in 2012. She was worried then that with Joe Lieberman leaving the Senate, we were losing national security hawks.

Hawks are nervous that, with the retirement of Sen. Joe Lieberman (I-Conn.) and the demands of a fiscal crisis, fewer lawmakers will be interested in and devoted to national security.

It was a genuine embrace. The sixth-generation Arkansan who grew up on a cattle farm read Leo Strauss the neocon icon when he was in college. And the letter to Iranian leaders is not his first outrageous letter. In 2006 he earned notoriety for a letter he wrote to the *New York Times* from Iraq where he was serving as an officer. The letter said that he hoped the Justice Department showed the courage of US soldiers and prosecuted the *New York Times* and its journalists for disclosing details of the government's program on stopping the funding of terrorists.

It does seem odd, given his professed admiration for the Founding Fathers, that anything written by Tom Cotton could be described as "fetish[izing] war." Not that he is unique among conservatives when it comes to a seemingly insatiable appetite for war. Even those in the GOP who also served in war ironically take a very hawkish tack when it comes to global combat operations carried out by the U.S. military.

The Founders, however, held a very different opinion of war. Take the [words of James Madison](#) as one of many condemnations of the same. Writing in 1795, Madison explained the effect of war:



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Of all the enemies to public liberty war is, perhaps, the most to be dreaded, because it comprises and develops the germ of every other. War is the parent of armies; from these proceed debts and taxes; and armies, and debts, and taxes are the known instruments for bringing the many under the domination of the few. In war, too, the discretionary power of the Executive is extended; its influence in dealing out offices, honors, and emoluments is multiplied; and all the means of seducing the minds, are added to those of subduing the force, of the people. The same malignant aspect in republicanism may be traced in the inequality of fortunes, and the opportunities of fraud, growing out of a state of war, and in the degeneracy of manners and of morals engendered by both. No nation could preserve its freedom in the midst of continual warfare.

Consider also [this statement](#) written in 1811 by Madison's great collaborator and countryman, Thomas Jefferson:

Peace ... has been our principle, peace is our interest, and peace has saved to the world this only plant of free and rational government now existing in it... However, therefore, we may have been reproached for pursuing our Quaker system, time will affix the stamp of wisdom on it, and the happiness and prosperity of our citizens will attest its merit. And this, I believe, is the only legitimate object of government and the first duty of governors, and not the slaughter of men and devastation of the countries placed under their care in pursuit of a fantastic honor unallied to virtue or happiness; or in gratification of the angry passions or the pride of administrators excited by personal incidents in which their citizens have no concern.

If Madison's counsel is correct, i.e., that no nation could remain free in the "midst of continual warfare," then why would Cotton and the coterie of neocon hawks that control Congress seem to always be looking for the next "threat" that needs to be bombed out of existence? Do they not see that their search for peace through war will destroy liberty?

Can they not appreciate the wisdom Jefferson assigns to the principle of peace upon which this government was built?

Weiss similarly struggles to understand Cotton's craving for continuous combat:

By the time he reached D.C., he seemed to love war a little too much. From Jennifer Rubin's column:

Cotton certainly advocates a strong U.S. presence in the world. He recalled, "What I used to say in the campaign was, 'You may be tired of war, but war is not tired of you.' There are evil people in the world who would do evil things." Because of questions about U.S. resolve, he pointed out, "Certain Middle East countries are hedging and edging closer to Iran." He said, "It's important to remind the American people why we're still engaged, [to] still maintain force projection, stand with Israel ... because it is not something they experience firsthand. They experience the economy, but they don't experience Gaza or Libya or Afghanistan."

Neoconservative Bret Stephens made the same comment, by the way, in February, quoting Lenin: "You may not be interested in war but war is interested in you."

Perhaps Senator Cotton believes he knows better than Madison and Jefferson. Comments he made quoted in [an article published in *The Atlantic*](#) last September suggest that he considers himself made of finer stuff than the rest of us:

Cotton insists that the Founders were wise not to put too much faith in democracy, because people



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are inherently selfish, narrow-minded, and impulsive. He defends the idea that the country must be led by a class of intellectually superior officeholders whose ambition sets them above other men. Though Cotton acknowledges that this might seem elitist, he derides the Federalists' modern critics as mushy-headed and naive.

"Ambition characterizes and distinguishes national officeholders from other kinds of human beings," Cotton wrote.

"Inflammatory passion and selfish interest characterizes most men, whereas ambition characterizes men who pursue and hold national office. Such men rise from the people through a process of self-selection since politics is a dirty business that discourages all but the most ambitious."

It seems a shame that Cotton's harvesting from the Founders' writings an appreciation of their disdain for democracy could not also have produced an understanding of their distaste for perpetual war.

Although it may be discomfiting for many so-called "conservatives" such as Cotton, McCain, et. al., the Founding Fathers they love to quote and claim as their own would smell monarchical aspirations and a draft of despotism in their martial machinations and clamor for combat.

As Jefferson wrote, quoting Montesquieu, "The spirit of monarchy is war and enlargement of domain: peace and moderation are the spirit of a republic."

Finally, in defense of the deployments, Cotton and company would cite their desire to promote principles of freedom abroad, to export American exceptionalism to the four corners of the benighted world. Jefferson (and others) has an answer for that ostensibly noble aim, as well. Writing to Thomas Paine in 1801, Jefferson explained why even war to support principles we adore is something we should abhor:

Determined as we are to avoid, if possible, wasting the energies of our people in war and destruction, we shall avoid implicating ourselves with the powers of Europe, even in support of principles which we mean to pursue. They have so many other interests different from ours, that we must avoid being entangled in them. *We believe we can enforce these principles as to ourselves by peaceable means, now that we are likely to have our public councils detached from foreign views.* [Emphasis added.]

While he's reading the words of the Founders, constitutionalists are hopeful that Senator Cotton comes across the quotes in this article.

Photo of Sen. Tom Cotton (R-Ark.): AP Images



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