Tom Cotton's immigration play: Arkansas senator bids to become the GOP's leading anti-immigrant scourge

With a proposal to shut down legal immigration, Cotton seizes the Republican base's most cherished cause

Simon Maloy

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With Sen. Jeff Sessions heading closer toward leading Donald Trump's Justice Department, it seems that there will be a large niche to fill for the leading anti-immigrant hawk in the U.S. Senate. There's a lot of power to be had in leading the nativist cause in Congress, given the Republican Party's hard lurch to the right on immigration issues and the fact that we just inaugurated a president who is committed to stoking panic about foreigners. So we can expect some highly ambitious strivers to lay claim to the Sessions legacy.

One of those strivers is Sen. Tom Cotton, R-Ark. Cotton arrived in the Senate in 2015 and tried to set up shop as the youthful face of hard-line neoconservative foreign policy. Basically, everything he did was geared toward picking a fight with Iran: He tried to blow apart the Iran nuclear deal. And he argued in transparent bad faith that dropping a few bombs on Iran wouldn't really count as "war." Immediately following Donald Trump's election as president, Cotton went on TV and talked about how excited he was that torture might become legal again.

Now he's switched focus. Cotton appears to be gunning for Sessions' hard-line anti-immigrant perch and is trying to demonstrate to the Trump administration just how useful a lackey he'll be in its push to wall off the country (literally and metaphorically) from foreigners.

As Politico reported on Tuesday morning, Cotton and Sen. David Perdue, R-Ga., are debuting new legislation that will largely choke off *legal immigration* and slash the number of refugees the U.S. accepts every year. This legislation, according to Perdue, will return the country to "historically normal levels of legal immigration" and "will help improve the quality of American jobs and wages."

This has long been a trope of immigration restrictionists who maintain that low-skilled immigrant laborers depress wages and take jobs from native-born workers.

Yet there's a strong body of research showing that low-skilled immigrant laborers can actually boost both job and wage growth for native workers; the basic idea is that those immigrant workers spend the money that they earn, which boosts local economies and creates more jobs. Indeed, think tanks from across the ideological spectrum have resisted the notion that curtailing immigration results in increased wages and job protection for native workers. As the libertarian Cato Institute wrote in response to a Cotton op-ed published in December, even if you succeed in driving up wages through harsh immigration controls, you're only going to incentivize low-skilled foreign workers to cross the border illegally.

None of that economic jibber-jabber is of any interest to Cotton, however, who dismisses the evidence contradicting his position as the bleak mewling of cloistered eggheads. Politico reported:

The Arkansas senator has already spoken with Trump and key White House officials about his immigration proposals, and says the administration has been receptive. And Cotton dismisses research that shows the economic boon of immigrants, including low-skilled workers, by paraphrasing George Orwell: "Only an intellectual could believe something so stupid."

The Politico article casts Cotton's position as a harbinger of an intraparty showdown within the GOP, with anti-immigration hard-liners like Trump, Sessions and Cotton on one side and the "Chamber of Commerce wing" (epitomized by House leaders Paul Ryan and Kevin McCarthy) on the other. If you've been paying attention to the politics of immigration within the Republican Party over the past few years, it should be pretty clear who will win this fight.

On immigration issues, Republicans have been consistently hemmed in by the desire for walls, deportations and stricter quotas among their party's base. The 2013 effort at passing a bipartisan comprehensive immigration reform bill stalled because Republicans in the House refused to move on it. In 2014 the party responded to the child migrant crisis by embracing a policy of maximal deportation. Last year's primaries were basically a months-long race to see who could (unsuccessfully) be more demagogic on immigration than Donald Trump. At every juncture, the anti-immigrant forces have prevailed.

This trend actually stretches all the way back to the George W. Bush administration, when the Republican president and the Republican-controlled Senate tried to pass comprehensive immigration reform legislation, but hard-liners in the House shot it all down, instead passing their own draconian series of measures to make undocumented immigrants into felons.

Cotton and his immigration-restriction buddies don't worry about whether their policies make any sense because they feel confident that nativism is a winner with Republican voters. Where they could run into a problem, however, is with the rest of the electorate, which over the past decade has grown significantly less concerned about any potential negative economic impact from immigration.