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GOP Senate candidate Joe O’Dea argues for border security at event with Arkansas Sen. Tom Cotton

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Republican U.S. Senate candidate Joe O’Dea underscored border security and crime as top priorities Monday afternoon at an event where he was joined by U.S. Sen. Tom Cotton.

Cotton, an Arkansas Republican, is a high-profile surrogate for conservatives who frequently campaigns for like-minded candidates. Having O’Dea serving in the Senate — and part of a Republican majority — would mean strides in beefing up border security, Cotton said.

O’Dea is challenging Democrat U.S. Sen. Michael Bennet this November in a race seen as a bellwether for the GOP breaking Democratic control of the chamber.

Both Cotton and O’Dea attacked a provision in the Inflation Reduction Act that would ramp up hiring for the Internal Revenue Service and said the money would be better served at the border and funding police.

“Let’s use that (IRS) funding to fix our border situation, let’s use that funding to fix our local cops,” O’Dea said. “That’s where I would start.”

O’Dea characterized extra IRS agents as being used to “shakedown working Americans.” O’Dea previously argued the extra money officials estimate would be collected with new IRS hiring isn’t worth the cost to taxpayers, and the country’s leaders should instead rein in spending.

O’Dea has stated he supports border security, including the wall, while wanting to protect “dreamers,” or immigrants who arrived in the country without documentation as young children and grew up here.

As immigration and border security became more highlighted issues in the campaign earlier this summer, Bennet noted his work passing the Gang of 8 immigration reform bill through the Senate in 2013, which ultimately stalled when Republican leadership in the House declined to bring the bill forward. That bill would have expanded border patrol, included funding for fencing along the border, and expanded the visa program.

O’Dea, Cotton and moderator George Brauchler tied border security to the fentanyl crisis, arguing that an overwhelmed border patrol leaves more gaps for cartels to smuggle the opiate into the country.

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A recent study by the libertarian Cato Institute found that more than 90% of fentanyl seizures at the border happen at legal crossing points, not illegal migration routes, and 86% of convicted fentanyl traffickers are U.S. citizens. The study also found a miniscule number of people arrested for illegal border crossing — .02% — had any fentanyl on them whatsoever.

While O’Dea disputed that, he also argued the issues of immigration and fentanyl smuggling are related regardless because of limits on border patrol’s time and focus.

“(Cops are) talking about cartels, and they’re talking about them putting it on illegal immigrants sometimes without their permission,” O’Dea said in an interview. “... We got a border that’s just leaking. They are inundated. There’s too many places to cross right now. We got to get our wall back up, we’ve got to get the border secured, and that’s how we get this fentanyl to stop.”

In addition to heavier border security, O’Dea also supports higher penalties for fentanyl possession. The severity of charges for fentanyl possession was heavily debated by state lawmakers this year, with supporters for felony charges arguing it gives law enforcement leverage to move up the hierarchy of distributors and as a tool to get people into treatment; opponents argue the state can’t arrest its way out of an addiction crisis.

During the event, Cotton proposed “actually going after the cartels.”

“Think what we would do if ISIS (the Islamic State) and al-Qaida set up shop in Tijuana and Juarez in Mexico and was responsible for 100,000 deaths of Americans a year,” Cotton said. “Again, something the Democrats don’t have the stomach for, but we do, and if you give us the majority by electing Joe O’Dea, we will.”

Asked about Cotton’s comment, O’Dea turned to his domestic proposals.

Cotton said he was out campaigning for O’Dea because he’d be more effective for his constituents with a “working Republican majority.” He said he doesn’t expect Joe O’Dea to vote with him all the time, while taking a shot at Bennet’s record of voting with fellow Democrats, but counted on O’Dea to “put the brakes on the most extreme parts of the Biden agenda.”