

Interview with Congressman Tom Cole (OK-04) Exclusive for the Oklahoma State Society



Congressman Tom Cole welcomed members of the Comanche Nation of Oklahoma during the Congressional Gold Medal of Honor Ceremony, honoring Native American code talkers.

OKSS: November is Native American Heritage Month. How has your Native American heritage shaped the direction of your life and guided your role in Congress?

Cole: My Native American heritage has been profoundly significant in my life, and it's something I was taught to be proud of growing up. My family has always been actively involved in tribal affairs. My great, great grandfather was the clerk of the Chickasaw Supreme Court, my great grandfather was the treasurer of the Chickasaw Nation and my mom was the first Native American woman ever elected to the Oklahoma State Senate.

Today, we live in an era of Tribal Renaissance, where tribal governments are helping drive the economy in Oklahoma, creating tens of thousands of jobs and generating hundreds of millions of dollars of revenue for the state government. We have a terrific Native American presence in our state, particularly in the Fourth District of Oklahoma. My own tribe, the Chickasaws, and 10 other tribes have substantial blocks of their areas of jurisdiction in my district.



Welcoming a group of Chickasaw students serving as interns through the Bureau of Indian Affairs

Given that background and the role of Native Americans in Oklahoma, this is an area I focus on probably more than most Members of Congress. And it's been an honor to emerge as a leader on Native American issues and affairs, including the victorious passage of the Cobell decision and the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA). Those two particular pieces of legislation will continue to be important in the years ahead.

OKSS: You are a former professor of history and politics, and your educational background proves your love of learning. How does your love of history influence your decision-making in Congress?

Cole: It influences my decision-making a great deal. I think if you understand the past, you have a pretty good grasp of the present and ability to think about where things are headed in the



Visiting with constituents of the Fourth District during a recent telephone town hall meeting

future. If you don't understand the past, it's trite but true, you really are condemned to repeat it. So I try to understand issues that come to me historically, as well as in terms of the policy and politics. I think about why issues are shaped the way they are, why people hold the opinions they do and what, on the trajectory of history, can be changed in a positive way.

Some people think linguistically, some people think mathematically, some people think scientifically. I think historically, and it shapes literally every political and policy decision that I make.

OKSS: Before Congress, you served in a variety of leadership roles in Oklahoma. Can you tell us about some of these experiences?

Cole: I began in a partisan sense really, as I was both the Executive Director and then later the State Chairman of the Oklahoma Republican Party. That was in a period when we were profoundly in the minority but were beginning to develop the appeal that now lets us dominate Oklahoma politics. These roles taught me a lot about organization and told me not to give up just because things seem to be difficult.

I moved from there to the Oklahoma State Senate. The State Legislature in Oklahoma is the equivalent of graduate school in politics. It's a place where you learn the political players and the processes that shape the state. It's terrific background for future leaders. If you look at the number of our current, statewide and congressional officials that have spent time in the Oklahoma Legislature, you really understand how profoundly important it is in shaping you and in building relationships that future political success depends on.

From there, I was Secretary of State in Oklahoma, and that gave me the privilege of being the political advisor and legislative liaison for one of the great governors in Oklahoma history: Frank Keating. I learned a lot from Frank Keating as a leader during the Oklahoma City bombing and just how he approached his job every single day. He was incredibly optimistic and upbeat about

both the state and the political process, and he had boundless energy. So I probably learned as much from him as anyone I've ever worked with or for.

I saw Oklahomans working together across party lines. We could put together big legislative deals even though we had very different political points of view. And during that time, I observed what governing could and did do to transform the Republican Party from being a minority party to an emerging majority party in Oklahoma.



Filming an episode of "Cole on Congress" with Congressman Markwayne Mullin (OK-02)

Frank Keating gets a lot of credit for that, and I'm proud to have assisted him in some small way.

OKSS: Is there a person who has influenced you the most during your career?

Cole: My mom without a doubt. She's still the best politician that I ever worked with or for, just intuitively a great political figure in her own right. She never got to serve in the majority, but she served in both the House and Senate and was mayor of our hometown. I think anyone who served with her knew that she was an extraordinarily formidable political figure, who knew how to shape legislation while serving in the minority and knew how to win in areas that were historically-Democrat by reaching out to people. She had incredibly profound insights into the nature of politics and was very practical in her views.

I wouldn't be in politics without her, and she's the reason I got into it by running her campaigns. It's the first serious political activity that I was involved in. I learned a lot doing it, and I caught the political bug from her.

She was interested in politics throughout her entire life, even before she was in office. She worked for years as a Republican activist. Around the dinner table, we discussed everything from the Eisenhower re-election to the Kennedy-Nixon debates to the emergence of Ronald Reagan. She was a Nixon alternate delegate in 1968, so I don't question who shaped my view of politics and who got me into it.



Surveying the devastating tornado damage in May with Senator Jim Inhofe

OKSS: Earlier this year, Oklahoma was devastated by the tornadoes that tore through your hometown of Moore and surrounding communities. How is recovery going back home?

Cole: It's going exceptionally well. Sadly, I've seen a lot of these things in Moore and other parts of Oklahoma. But Oklahomans are always tough. They help one another, they stick together and they know how to handle crises.

In Moore, we're more experienced at this than probably anyone else in the state of Oklahoma. We have terrific local leadership, and we've received wonderful help from the communities all around us. Oklahomans always come to your aid.

We've also gotten a terrific federal response. I can't say enough good things about the initial FEMA response with Director Fugate and the fact that President Obama actually took the time to come to Moore and tour the disaster site. That's pretty unusual. And we've since gotten wonderful help from the folks at HUD and other agencies, so the federal response has been great.

What has probably touched me the most is the extraordinary outpouring of generosity by other Americans outside of Oklahoma. I've never seen anything like it through a tornado disaster, and that's probably because of the tragic loss of children in Plaza Towers Elementary School. But whatever the reason, we've gotten more assistance from other Americans than is normally the case in one of these situations. And we're grateful.

Again, the recovery couldn't be better. The spirit is strong. We're going to be back, and we appreciate all the help that we've gotten from other people. We don't look forward to extending this same help to them because I wouldn't wish this on anyone, but we'll certainly be prepared to help anyone just as we've received assistance in this particular case.

OKSS: We have Bedlam coming up very soon. Who will you be cheering for?

Cole: Oh, I bleed crimson and cream. But I respect the Cowboys, and I root for them every game but one. I really do. And I tremble for the fate of my Sooners going up there this year because obviously OSU is a very good team.



Filming a television interview before a town hall meeting in Duncan, OK

We're struggling a little bit this year, but it's always a great game. And fortunately, if you're from the University of Oklahoma, you've had more good moments than bad in this game. I would expect the Cowboys to be the favorite, but I've never seen a Sooner team that didn't go give everything it had in that game. And we certainly intend to do that. I'm hopeful that we can surprise people, including ourselves, and actually win.

OKSS: What books are you reading right now?

Cole: I am reading James Swanson's *End of Days*, which is on the Kennedy assassination—really a compellingly good read.

I just finished Mark Leibovich's *This Town*, which is a pretty hard look at Washington, DC. I think it's even more cynical than is justified, but certainly it contains some things to reflect upon like the way the capital works and why Americans have lost faith in a lot of what goes on up here.

I just bought a copy of Doris Kearns Goodwin's **Bully**. It's about the friendship and relationship between Theodore Roosevelt and Howard Taft and how that shaped the first part of the 20th century. I'm looking forward to starting this one pretty quickly because I must say the Swanson book on the Kennedy assassination is a wonderfully quick read. You're not going to put it down.



Discussing current issues with DC office interns during weekly intern hour

OKSS: Any words of wisdom for Oklahomans living in Washington, DC?

Cole: Stay in touch with home and always remember where you're from. Everyone in Washington, DC really does need to be from somewhere, and we're pretty fortunate to be from a wonderful place.

When I came to Washington as the Executive Director of the NRCC in 1991, I asked the legendary J.D. Williams, who founded Williams and Jensen, for advice. He said, "Tom, if you live in Washington, DC, be from somewhere else and somewhere else for you is Oklahoma." It was a great piece of advice and one I've tried to pass on to other Oklahomans.