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By: William Gibson

WASHINGTON—

U.S. Rep. Allen West strode up to a buzzing crowd of conservative activists who had gathered in the bowels of the Capitol, setting off a wave of applause as delighted fans rushed up to shake his hand and snap his picture.

Roger Hedgecock, a beaming radio talk-show host from San Diego, directed West to a table with a microphone, where they both launched into a nationwide broadcast blasting President Barack Obama and the "out-of-touch" world of Washington.

West accused Democrats of "leadership by fear-mongering," called the detention center at Guantanamo Bay "a five-star hotel for some very bad actors" and said that when people like Secretary of State Hillary Clinton dictate foreign policy "we are in a world of you-know-what."

It was just another day in the media bubble for West, a Republican from Plantation, whose blunt-spoken conservatism is gaining nationwide fame, much of it fueled by radio and TV talk shows. Loved and loathed for his views, this rising star of the tea party movement has become a mass-media phenomenon with a fan base spreading across the country.

Susan Kuhn, a retired teacher from Chula Vista, Calif., applauded along with the rest of Hedgecock's live radio audience, which had come to lobby for conservative causes. "If Allen West could ever become president some day, that would be a dream come true for us," she gushed.

The freshman from Florida, only three months in office, has turned this extraordinary national exposure into a pulpit for espousing his views and projecting his persona.

People from other states are amazed that a black conservative former Army lieutenant colonel triumphed in a South Florida congressional district that is sometimes wrongly perceived from afar as a Democratic stronghold.

"Here were these voters relating to a black man from the Army who was conservative. I thought, this is a wonderful moment," said Hedgecock, who recalled walking the humid streets of South Florida last year to campaign door-to-door for West. "It's that chemistry that has made him a favorite for a lot of people and a lightning rod for a lot of discussion."

Detractors

A critic of multiculturalism and political correctness, West employs a take-no-prisoners way of talking that violates the usual niceties. He raised eyebrows, for instance, by vowing in one radio interview to bring to its knees "this liberal, progressive, socialist agenda, this left-wing, vile, vicious, despicable machine that's out there."

As a result, he has become a hero in conservative circles and the bane of liberal commentators, who have seized upon his notoriety with a vengeance.

MSNBC's Rachel Maddow mocked his "kooky national profile" and implied that West's hard-charging election campaign seemed to encourage political violence. Maddow repeatedly ran a video clip showing radio talk-show host Joyce Kaufman declaring at a West campaign rally, "If ballots don't work, bullets will."

Keith Olbermann, formerly with MSNBC, called West a "bald-faced liar" who had "disgraced the uniform" of his country and was prone to "tiptoe along the bright line of fascism."

West said his detractors are thrown off-balance by the rise of an African-American who grew up in the Democratic hotbed of Atlanta but took a very different path.

"They've got to take shots at me because they are threatened by it," he said. "Think about what I represent: coming out of the inner city, a black conservative, 22-year veteran of the U.S. military. It's pretty threatening to them, because I'm not their norm. I'm not the thing that makes them comfortable."

Network News

West has become a perennial presence on Fox News, a favorite of conservative viewers, but he also gets air time on every other major U.S. network, and some from overseas.

Katie Couric of CBS News wanted to know how West intended to bridge the gap between moderate and far-right Republicans. Judy Woodruff of PBS NewsHour asked whether he was willing to compromise on Republican demands for federal spending cuts.

David Gregory of NBC's "Meet the Press" wondered whether West approved of security pat-downs at airports.

The BBC — which reported that West and Sen. Marco Rubio, R-Fla., are among the "emerging hotshots to watch" — contacts West's office nearly every week, says his communications director, Angela Sachitano. She also fields demands from a swarm of bloggers.

"Everybody assumes he's an expert in everything," Sachitano remarked, with a touch of bemusement. "Got an issue? Go to Allen West."

The congressman accommodates most of these requests with a shrug. "I've been shot at," said the Iraq war veteran. "A microphone doesn't bother me."

Conservative pulpit

He sounds mystified by all the attention but has seized the opportunity to spread his message — basically the tea party message — which calls for drastic cuts in federal spending, lower taxes, repeal of the health care law and a more responsive government.

"It gives you a pulpit," he said while walking through a Capitol corridor between interviews. "And as long as you stay on message, people will want to hear you. If I'm such a radical, why do people keep wanting to hear what I have to say?"

Glenn Beck, the conservative TV personality, said this week he was so impressed that he wants to draft West to run for president. "He's got a strong military background, and he is not afraid to pull the trigger," Beck said on a videotaped talk show.

This kind of exposure has helped West attract campaign contributions from around the country. He reported on Friday that he raised \$433,500 in the first quarter of this year for his congressional re-election campaign, with donations to date averaging \$73.

Most freshmen members toil in obscurity for many years before finding the limelight. Some see the bright lights but only briefly.

U.S. Rep. Mario Diaz-Balart, R-Miami, said the media star of his freshman class of 2003 was Katherine Harris, a former congresswoman from Sarasota. She had gained notoriety as the Florida secretary of state who quickly declared George W. Bush a winner in Florida during the bitterly contested presidential election of 2000.

"It was a running joke that if you wanted to get press coverage, just stand next to Katherine Harris," Diaz-Balart recalled, "because the cameras would literally follow her around."

West gets a lot of media coverage, Diaz-Balart said, largely because "he's brutally honest, which I find really refreshing."

Interview demands

As a result, interviewers cannot seem to get enough of him.

The same day he talked with Hedgecock, West followed a familiar path to the Fox News studios

for an interview with Greta Van Susteren at 10 p.m.

At 7 the next morning, he was back on Capitol Hill in suit and tie for another string of interviews, this time with a host of conservative radio broadcasters who had come to pressure Congress to strictly enforce immigration laws. They especially wanted to talk to West.

What's his great appeal? And what sets him apart from the other 86 Republican freshmen?

"I just know that he breaks through," said Todd Feinburg of WRKO-AM, based in Boston. "He is a lucid and even-tempered presenter of rational politics as we see it on the conservative side. Then you combine that with his military background and being black. The black thing gives him the ability to break through communication barriers, to shock people."

Many politicians yearn for this extent of media exposure because they aim for higher office.

West so far has shrugged off pressure to run for a U.S. Senate seat in Florida next year or to

eventually seek the presidency. Instead, he has set a self-imposed limit of eight years in the U.S. House.

"If I can't make an impact in six to eight years," he said, "I don't need to be here."