



Desperation has brought Fran Hunsaker here, 1,000 miles from home, to the dark office of a Florida Congressman she knows only from television.

She is trying to save her son. And Hunsaker hopes to find help in the eyes of Rep. Allen West, a military commander turned GOP Representative, who made his mark on the campaign trail as one of the tea party's favorite soldiers.

"My son says, 'In order to fight a monster, you have to be a monster,'" says Hunsaker, a Missouri resident whose son, William, has spent the past five years locked in a federal prison in Leavenworth, Kan., for war crimes. "Congressman West has looked into the abyss. He's been there. He knows what it's like."

Indeed, the freshman lawmaker has been there — closer, perhaps, than he'd like at times during a military career that spanned two decades. And even today, long after he traded his

military fatigues for dark suits, it is often difficult to separate the soldier from this Congressman.

The soldier shows himself in the pins on West's suit jacket, his choice of words, his camouflage tote bag and in his evolution from tea party candidate and political bomb thrower to deliberate Congressman.

But on this day, West cannot do much more than listen to a mother's pleas and promise to ask questions. It's the least he can do, he later says, considering his own brush with the military justice system back in 2003.

Navigating the Battlefield

"Of course there's still people out there who say I'm a war criminal. I can't change that," West says, referring to accusations that soldiers under his supervision assaulted an Iraqi detainee.

The episode, in which West fired a gun close to the man's head, prompted a military investigation resulting in a fine and his subsequent retirement from the Army.

"I was looking at eight to nine years myself," he adds with a shake of the head.

But it was that experience and others, he says, that prepared him for a different kind of battlefield on Capitol Hill.

"Here, you have to be even more savvy and attuned to the invisible mine fields and the invisible bullet," he says. "But I don't find this to be very difficult whatsoever."

There have, however, been challenges, particularly as the excitement of a campaign became the struggle to govern. West has been forced to adapt to his new surroundings — a skill he says

developed in the Army — to become relevant in a system that rewards loyalty and experience, not the anti-establishment fervor that helped him and other GOP freshmen win elections across the nation in 2010.

"If I come up here and become, as many people thought, the flame-throwing, bombastic radical, I'm not going to get anywhere. I'll be relegated to a corner and I will be made irrelevant," he says. "The prudent commander is very smart and is able to adapt very quickly and show flexibility on the battlefield. Washington, D.C., is a battlefield."

On the National Stage

But that's not to say that West has abandoned his aggressive rhetoric altogether.

He made his share of headlines and enemies before and after his election by evoking Nazi Germany, lashing out at what he called President Barack Obama's "Marxist rhetoric," and accusing Democrats of "opportunism" following the shooting of Rep. Gabrielle Giffords (D-Ariz.).

West is a regular on cable television. And he continues to be a prolific fundraiser, largely because his tea party fame and frequent media presence helps drive a national fundraising operation.

There is an "Allen West for President" Facebook page. And an online "Draft Allen West for POTUS" petition has drawn nearly 3,500 signatures so far.

But West says he is simply running for re-election to his House seat in 2012.

"The talk about higher office, being a leader, some of the incredible national-level attention and interviews is humbling. It's also a huge responsibility as well," he says. "Everyone's looking at what you're doing. There are so many people waiting to set the trap for you. But it's going to be very difficult to trap an old cagey soldier like myself."

For a tea party member who surprised the political establishment by winning a Florida swing district last fall, West he has demonstrated political savvy in his first five months in Congress. This skill is apparent in his willingness to work with the House leadership, even as tea party activists elsewhere suggest that Speaker John Boehner (R-Ohio) should be replaced.

West has largely fallen in line, going so far as to accept a position, along with 14 other freshmen, on the National Republican Congressional Committee's dues whipping team.

"John Boehner's been up here for 20 years. I dare not try to make a judgment assessment on a guy after I've been up here four or so months. I think that would be absolutely juvenile to do that," he says.

But is he totally satisfied with the Speaker?

"I think that based upon his experiences he's doing the best he possibly can do. Based upon my background experiences, let's say if a guy like Allen West was the Speaker of the House, I'd do things differently, because of my background, being in the military and how they train us."

He's No Lemming

The tea party has noticed West's shift. In some cases, it has not responded well.

The Congressman broke with GOP leadership and the tea party last month on a largely symbolic vote to repeal a piece of Obama's health care overhaul. The specific provision would have blocked \$100 million from going to build school-based health centers.

West was among a handful of GOP freshmen to vote against the cut, telling Roll Call that some votes to repeal the health care bill are a waste of time.

"I do find it very funny that one minute everyone wants you to be president, and the next minute everyone says you're a RINO," he says. "So that just kind of lets you know that there's some confusion out there with what people really do want."

He says he didn't come to Washington to be a lemming.

"This is the promise I made to folks: I will come up here and I will represent them with honor, integrity and character, that I will prove myself to be a capable legislator and an American statesman, and that I would read the legislation and understand it. ... If those aren't the qualities people want, then our country's going to hell very quickly."

Those are exactly the qualities that Hunsaker, the mother of the imprisoned soldier, is looking for.

Hunsaker contacted the offices of Missouri Sen. Claire McCaskill (D), Arizona Sen. John McCain (R) and the White House, among others. But only West was willing to meet about her son, one of the "Leavenworth 10." William Hunsaker could be locked inside Leavenworth for another decade for what his mother says was simply following orders.

West "is a statesman, not a politician. He is proving it by leading by example — none of the Leavenworth 10 are constituents of his, but he still goes out of his way to help us," Hunsaker says. "We need him as commander in chief, because he has looked into the abyss."

West, meanwhile, believes it's simply his duty to listen.

"I don't ever want to forget from whence I came," he says. "I will never forget that I was a soldier."

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