

WASHINGTON -- Rep. Allen West doesn't do subtlety.

Take the recent suggestion to his congressional colleagues — Democrats and Republicans — pressing for a speedy exit of U.S. troops from Afghanistan: "I would take these gentlemen over and let them get shot at a few times and maybe they'd have a different opinion," says West, a retired Army lieutenant colonel who spent 22 years in the service.

Firm in his convictions and unafraid to share them. It was vintage West — brash, brusque and bombastic.

The black biker and conservative Republican who became a fixture on the tea party circuit has brought his own brand to Congress.

"I'm not a career politician," West says. "I'm just being myself."

When West speaks his mind, it turns on his tea party fan base, which is hoping the fiery freshman will run for president in 2012. But Democrats consider him vulnerable. Two are already gunning for his seat, repeating the 2010 campaign attack line that he's too far right for the moderate Broward-Palm Beach district that went for Democrats Barack Obama in 2008 and John Kerry in 2004. Republicans are looking to defend him, putting his congressional seat in the first round of a national protection program aimed at keeping their most endangered candidates in office.

West, characteristically, has a blunt message for his opponents: "Tell them to have fun, try," he says.

"I'm not a vulnerable candidate, I'm a target," he says. "I'm a target because the Democrats are not used to anyone who will stand up and confront them."

"A black conservative from the inner city and a retired military veteran is something that causes them concerns," he says. "I'm not the typical victim ... and they don't want to see me around."

There's little about West, 50, that says "typical." His graying military-style flattop, impeccably fitted suits and wire-rim glasses say buttoned-down businessman — albeit one who rides a Harley and starts every morning with a bracing miles-long run. (He's even incorporated his running into fundraising, inviting donors in May on a four-mile run across the National Mall).

And though he evinces pride at being the first black Republican from Florida since Josiah T. Walls arrived in Washington in 1876, he has been sharply critical of America's first black president, including President Barack Obama's middle name of Hussein when he talks about him and accusing the president of harboring "conscious, nefarious, and malicious intent" for suggesting that any peace agreement with Israel should begin at the 1967 borders.

"I'm sorry," West says, sounding anything but regretful for his remarks. "But when you suggest putting our ally at risk, I've got to ask, 'Sir, what was the intent here?' "

West is a tea party superstar, but he hasn't always followed its script either. He was one of just four Republicans to vote against a GOP bill that targeted the Democrats' healthcare plan by striking \$100 million for school-based healthcare centers.

West defended his vote in a video interview posted on the conservative blog The Shark Tank, saying he didn't come to Washington "to be a lemming."

Closer to home, he has supported spending on local projects, including the awarding of a \$21 million federal grant to the Fort Lauderdale-Hollywood International Airport for runway construction. West defended the project, saying it would generate thousands of jobs.

Rep. Tom Rooney, R-Tequesta, a Republican deputy whip often charged with pulling his neighboring colleague into the GOP fold, acknowledges West is a tough sell.

"He's not very easily swayed off what his principles are and I think that's an admirable trait," Rooney says. "When he explains to you why he is where he is on certain issues it's very hard to disagree with what he's saying, even if I'm trying to convince him to do something different."

West is a frequent guest on Fox News, gave the keynote address at the Conservative Political Action Conference and delivered a speech calling for more military spending at the conservative Heritage Foundation.

Yet he rarely speaks on the House floor. And though he caused a stir when he pressed to join the all-Democratic Congressional Black Caucus, he rarely talks when the group meets.

"He has been very approachable," says caucus chair Rep. Emanuel Cleaver, D-Mo. West didn't join the group when they met with Obama, prompting Cleaver's opening line "Mr. President, I want you to know all the members of the Congressional Black Caucus are committed to your reelection, but one." Obama laughed, Cleaver said, And said, "yes, I know, Mr. West."

"I'm not here to come in and showboat," West says. "The most important thing as a young freshman is to sit back and survey the battlefield ...When the time is right for me to speak, I do speak.

"The very smart military commander knows how and when to attack," adds West, who retired following a 2003 military investigation into allegations he fired a gun near the head of a prisoner in Iraq. Authorities did not pursue a court martial against West, who was fined \$5,000.

Democrats have launched an aggressive campaign against West, believing they've got a potent weapon in their signature campaign against Republicans: his support for a controversial House budget plan that would remake Medicare. Future beneficiaries — those 55 and under — would get a government subsidy to purchase private health insurance.

The chances for Democrats may largely hinge on how the district is redrawn. It now has the seventh-highest number of seniors in the country and Democrats have already put up radio ads and robocalls excoriating West for the Medicare vote.

West's two opponents: former West Palm Beach mayor and state legislator Lois Frankel and Patrick Murphy, a 28-year-old businessman, have begun raising money and campaigning.

Murphy, who switched from the GOP to the Democratic Party a few months ago, isn't well-known. But he still has raised about \$350,000 during the first quarter — \$100,000 more than Frankel.

And though Frankel is the more seasoned candidate, her lengthy political tenure could provide fodder to the GOP.

She's already suggesting that her line of attack will include West's Medicare vote.

"He can't just run on being a tea party star, a talk show star," Frankel says. "He has to run on his real record — wanting to take away Medicare, not focusing on jobs. That's his record."

But West isn't blinking — even as protesters shouted displeasure at his town hall meetings and Republicans lost a reliably safe seat in New York after getting hammered by the Medicare vote.

"You had a candidate who didn't run a very good campaign," West says of the GOP loss in New York, accusing Democrats of "demagoguing" the issue without offering a solution.

"It's not going to happen to me," he says. "I understand how the other side works. They're very tough. I can be just as tough."

West was part of a bruising campaign in 2010 when he soundly defeated Democratic incumbent Rep. Ron Klein. There are still hard feelings from when Democrats tried to link West to the Outlaws motorcycle group and Rep. Debbie Wasserman Schultz staged a protest at his office suggesting he was anti-women. He still says he wants an apology from Wasserman Schultz — but expects a very different campaign in 2012.

"I think we've overcome all that," he says. "I think that I've proven this is about meeting in the arena of ideas. This is not about character assassination. That's not going to win elections in these times because the American people know how critical the situation is."

West's brash style and conservative politics have ignited fans across the country — they've contributed to his campaign and created a draft West for president website. West himself said in May that "no one [in the GOP presidential primary field] is really exciting anyone out there."

"A person who can give us back America, God Bless America and In God we Trust," wrote one fan on DraftAllenWest.com. "We need Allen West in the White House in 2012."

West calls the draft talk flattering, but insists he's running for reelection. He recently announced plans to qualify for the ballot by gathering signatures and his office cranked out a news release touting his accomplishments in his first months in office — including not missing any votes.

Robin Rorapough, a Democratic activist and consultant who lives in a neighboring district, notes West has held more town hall meetings than his peers.

"I'm not sure to know him is to love him," she says, adding, "I think people give a grudging respect to politicians who actually face the public on a regular basis."

Cara Zimmerman, 54, a Boca Raton food pantry coordinator and independent voter who backed West, says he's "someone that can be trusted, which is kind of odd in Congress today."

Zimmerman was among the West fans at a recent Town Hall where West delivered a slide show presentation on the economy — and joked he's no GOP purist by noting he recently voted for a measure sponsored by Dennis Kucinich, a liberal Ohio congressman.

"Anyone wants to talk about me not being bipartisan," West said with a smile, "Me and Dennis Kucinich got together on something."

Back in Washington, leaving a Small Business Committee hearing (one of at least 18 he's attended, according to his office stat sheet), West says his goal "is to be an American statesman and a capable legislator."

"I have to prove myself here," he says. "The most important thing is for me to win reelection, to let folks know I was not a fluke."

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