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Tom Cotton's Fascist Op-Ed

How should opinion pages respond to the right's authoritarian turn?

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Before Donald Trump became president, most newspaper op-ed pages sought to present a spectrum of politically significant opinion and argument, which they could largely do while walling off extremist propaganda and incitement. The Trump presidency has undermined that model, because there's generally no way to defend the administration without being either bigoted or dishonest.

Opinion sections, eager to maintain ideological diversity without publishing lies or stuff that belongs in Breitbart, have therefore filled up with anti-Trump conservatives. As a result, newspapers like this one have often been criticized for elevating an intellectual clique that has little mass base or political influence.

So I can sort of appreciate my bosses' decision on Wednesday to run Senator Tom Cotton's screed arguing that the military should be sent to American cities to "restore order," which has caused a rebellion inside The New York Times. The Times Opinion section wants to include the views of people who support Trump, and the very qualities that make Cotton's Op-Ed revolting — his strongman pretensions, his sneering apocalypticism — make him an important figure in Trump's Republican Party. (He might someday come to lead it.)

Readers should grasp what people like Cotton are arguing, not because it's *worth* taking seriously but because it *is* being taken seriously, particularly by our mad and decomposing president. Cotton has made an even more extreme version of the case for military occupation of

American cities on Twitter, but most Americans aren't on Twitter. The paper could convey his views by reporting on them, but for the Opinion section, letting him express them himself is more direct.

In the past, The Times's Op-Ed page has offered space to enemies of the United States, including President Vladimir Putin of Russia and Sirajuddin Haqqani, deputy leader of the Taliban, arguing that its readers are served by access to their perspectives.

"Haqqani is the second in command of the Taliban at a time when its negotiators are hammering out an agreement with American officials in Doha that could result in American troops leaving Afghanistan. That makes his perspective relevant at this particular moment," a Times spokeswoman argued in response to outrage over his Op-Ed in February.

A similar case could be made for hearing from Cotton, an enemy of liberal democracy who has the president's ear. He is relevant, whether we like it or not. (Soon after his piece was published, Trump retweeted it.)

Thus when I first saw the Cotton Op-Ed I wasn't as horrified as perhaps I should have been; I figured he'd helpfully revealed himself as a dangerous authoritarian. But as I've seen my colleagues' anguished reaction, I've started to doubt my debating-club approach to the question of when to air proto-fascist opinions.

Putin and Haqqani, after all, weren't given space in this newspaper to advocate attacks on Americans during moments of national extremis. Cotton, by contrast, is calling for what would almost certainly amount to massive violence against his fellow citizens: an "overwhelming show of force to disperse, detain and ultimately deter lawbreakers."

In a racist inversion, he equates his fantasy of soldiers putting down an uprising triggered by police brutality against black people with previous presidents using the military to enforce desegregation.

His argument is frequently slippery and dishonest. The claim that police officers "bore the brunt of the violence" is hard to square with countless videos of police instigation. (So far, more civilians than police officers have been reported killed during the uprising.)

Cotton notes that President George H.W. Bush sent federal troops into Los Angeles in 1992 to quell the riots that broke out after the police who beat Rodney King were acquitted. But he doesn't tell readers that Bush did so at the invitation of California's governor.

That's very different from the federal government overriding local elected authorities and occupying their states and cities, which seems to be what Cotton is proposing. It's an idea that appalls many military leaders.

As James Mattis, Trump's first defense secretary, made clear in his scathing condemnation of the president: "We must reject any thinking of our cities as a 'battlespace' that our uniformed military is called upon to 'dominate.' At home, we should use our military only when requested to do so, on very rare occasions, by state governors."

Many people at The Times, including several in the Opinion department, reacted to the Cotton Op-Ed by tweeting, "Running this puts all black people in danger, including @nytimes staff members." That took courage. The culture at The Times frowns on intramural criticism. The journalism industry is in free-fall, and working here often feels like being on the last boat out of a burning harbor. It is not a small thing to risk one's seat on it.

The danger my colleagues have tweeted about is real. All across America in the last week, peaceful protesters and journalists have been brutalized by police officers in the name of law and order.

Anyone who has ever seen a military occupation up close should know how much uglier it can get. That includes Cotton, who on Twitter called for "no quarter for insurrectionists, anarchists, rioters, and looters."

As David French, a conservative writer who is, like Cotton, a veteran of the war in Iraq, pointed out, "no quarter" orders — which mean showing the enemy no mercy, even if they try to surrender — are a war crime.

So the value of airing Cotton's argument has to be weighed against the message The Times sends, in this incendiary moment, by including it within the bounds of legitimate debate. Everyone agrees that The Times draws those boundaries. The question is where.

I could be wrong, but I don't believe The Times would have published a defense of family separation by former Homeland Security Secretary Kirstjen Nielsen during the height of that atrocity, or a piece by the senior Trump aide Stephen Miller about the necessity of curbing nonwhite immigration. In both cases, I'm pretty sure the liberal inclination to hear all sides would have smacked up against sheer moral abhorrence.

It's important to understand what the people around the president are thinking. But if they're honest about what they're thinking, it's usually too disgusting to engage with. This creates a crisis for traditional understandings of how the so-called marketplace of ideas functions. It's a subsidiary of the crisis that has the country on fire.

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