

DEAD MAN RUNNING

How an Underfunded, Grassroots,
Conservative Congressional Candidate Took on the
Popular Liberal Democrat Incumbent and the Republican
Party Establishment, and Forced a Change in Congress

Rob Curnock

FOREWORD

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Many names have been changed in *Dead Man Running* to protect the privacy of non-public individuals appearing in this book. These changes in no way alter the veracity or description of the actual events herein.

Although there are many conversations described in this book, most are not retold to the reader verbatim. However, these conversations *are* based on the author's (and others') recollections and are written with the intent to convey the truest and most accurate reflection of those verbal interactions and incidents.

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In *Dead Man Running*, Rob Curnock provides a fascinating firsthand insight on the challenges, joys, and heartbreaks of a conservative Republican running an underdog campaign for public office. His is a story of enduring American values—the values of fighting and sacrificing for one's principles, love of country, taking on establishment powers, and plain old grit and determination. Rob and I disagree on a lot of political issues; in fact, as a Democratic US congressman, I was a target of much of Rob's political activities through the years. But we are friends to this day because of our common bond of caring about our democracy and country.



Rob lost his 2008 underdog, underfunded campaign against me, but his strong showing paved the way for the 2010 election of the first ever Republican congressman from our Central Texas district. Rob might have initially been blind to the challenges of beating an entrenched congressional incumbent, but he had twenty-twenty vision of his political principles and the courage to fight for them. In doing so, he made a difference.

Whether one is a conservative Republican or a progressive Democrat, we can all learn from the enduring values of *Dead Man Running*.

—Former Congressman Chet Edwards

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I want to express my unceasing gratitude to my good friend Steve Toon and my wonderful wife Karen for their incredible help in editing and organizing this literary political true-life adventure.

* * * * *

I also want to thank everyone who played a part in helping make this specific political change described in *Dead Man Running*. Electoral conflict is not for the faint of heart, but it is the very core of a Representative Republic. Even those who find themselves on opposite sides in the conflict don't necessarily have to lose their humanity in the process...or the aftermath.

I pray that's the case in this political saga.

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INTRODUCTION

As the train drew closer to my destination of the seat of American political power, the clean, sleek subway car I had settled into grew crowded. More commuters gathered, many government workers making their way to their jobs manning the ranks of the federal bureaucracy. Others were probably tourists, lobbyists, and other assorted citizens. As each station approached, I was struck by the faux familiarity I was experiencing, names of places and areas that I recognized from my history books and news reports: Arlington National Cemetery, Foggy Bottom, The Pentagon. Each stop brought me closer to my eventual goal on so many levels—Capitol Hill.

I had dressed in what has become a quasi-uniform for most congressmen, a dark blue suit, white shirt, and red tie. I figured I could at least look the part for my day on Capitol Hill. My apparel appeal evidently worked.

Periodically, the light disappeared outside of the car as the subway passed into tunnels or underground sections. The windows suddenly became mirrors, and I was acutely aware that most of the people reflected around me were looking intently at me. On several occasions, while facing inward, I inadvertently met the eyes of one. Maybe it was my imagination, but it appeared to me they were trying to discern if I was indeed a denizen of Congress and, if so, did they perhaps recognize me? I assume it's not uncommon for regular commuters to spot the occasional elected official heading for their jobs in the Capitol Building. It's amazing what the right suit can do for you.

I had spent the night in my hotel in suburban Washington, D.C., anticipating the gravity of the next day's events. This was the first real political action committee that was even willing to hear me

out. My candidacy was dismissed out of hand by virtually every other entity involved in donating to congressional campaigns. As an incumbent, Democrat Congressman Chet Edwards' financial reports were wall-to-wall with business and organizational donations. Although I had no desire to fund my campaign entirely with "professional" donors, and I would press on no matter what, this meeting presented an opportunity to establish some sort of credibility with the political donor class.

The train arrived at the Capitol Hill station and I joined hundreds of other commuters converging on the impressive four-story escalators heading to the surface. I emerged into the bright sunlight of a beautiful Washington morning. Still several hours away from my appointed time at the national Republican headquarters, I decided to explore my surroundings and take in the sights at the center of the American political universe.

The Capitol building sits atop a wide hill with federal and political buildings ringing three sides of the property. On the sidewalk in front of the congressional and senatorial offices, I encountered a small group of protesters holding signs for and against various assorted causes and issues. I watched bemusedly as these people desperately looked for some sort of recognition and attention from both the foot and vehicular traffic surrounding the halls of Congress. I found that I actually agreed with more than a few signs.

I walked up the street at one side of the Capitol and quickly recognized the Supreme Court. Pausing for a few moments, I soaked it in and pondered the enormity of what I was seeing. As a history buff, it was sobering to be standing on the ground where so much history had been created over the centuries.

The National Republican Congressional Committee building is adjacent to the Capitol. After passing security and establishing my business for being there, I was buzzed into the interior of the

building and directed to where I would have my meeting with my potential supporters.

I sat down and drank in all the sights of the waiting area. This was definitely another world. With plush decor and ornate furnishings surrounding me, I pondered that I wasn't in Waco, Texas, anymore. Suddenly I understood why so many otherwise well-grounded individuals succumb to the mindset of Washington and all its seductive power and prestige. It reinforced in me the thought that if you aren't well grounded in your purpose and mission for being in Washington, you could easily lose sight of the real world that sent you there.

Unexpectedly, feelings of doubt soon overwhelmed me. *Who am I to be sitting here? I'm just little Rob Curnock from Waco. This is the big leagues. These people are important. What am I thinking? I have no business here.*

It was a slight and momentary questioning of my entire purpose and what I had been striving to accomplish for the last eight months and, in reality, the past six years.

I determined then and there that no matter what might lie ahead, I must stay focused on my reason for seeking Congress. I had a mission, ideology, and a goal. If I lost sight of any of those, I would betray everything I believed in as a person, a political office holder, and as a Christian, who quietly heeds a higher calling.

Nervously, I went over my thoughts. I wanted to make sure I made the most of this one-time chance to make some allies in our battle to secure a seat for like-minded conservatives. As the stress level rose, I realized this was no good. If I rehearsed, I would come off as contrived—an actor. My passion for redirecting our nation's priorities is no act for personal gain.

While I struggled with the human civilized version of the old instinctual biological quandary of fight or flight, a middle-aged woman

came toward me from out of the double doors at the end of the hall. She had a smile on her face. “Are you Rob?” Although we had never met in person, it gave me comfort when I immediately recognized her voice from our phone calls.

Shortly thereafter she ushered me into a large meeting hall, with tables ringing the entire room. Thirty or so men and women sat around the tables. Some ate; others glanced at papers. A few made eye contact and nodded. My hostess warmly introduced me and turned me loose to tell my story.

Once again, as had happened before on the campaign, my flight turned to fight. As I gazed around the room and glanced out the sunny windows toward the Capitol across the way, I quickly focused on the true reason for my far-reaching, Davidian quest. Yes, as trite as it sounds, the country that I grew up in is quickly disappearing, and if I’m not willing to fight for this incredible gift from our Founding Fathers, then who would?

If I have integrity, I have no choice but to fight on. If not, I’m nothing more than a scared bystander who’s watching a mob about to lynch someone and is unwilling to speak up and stop what is about to occur. It definitely takes courage, maybe even a bit of craziness, but if it’s right, it has to be done. I have to stand up for traditional values and express those values for the average, like-minded Americans who may not have that ability to communicate.

I launched.

“The left-wing Democrats keep inching closer and closer to a mild, secular socialism, and are dragging this country down a path that will eventually be calamitous. The moderate Republican establishment leadership is either unwilling or unable to forestall the proactive Democrats in their relentless and aggressive pursuit of transforming America into something unrecognizable from the constitutional foundation of a great nation established on the unique

concept of personal freedoms. We’re in a battle for the very life of America as we’ve known it. The country is divided, and business-as-usual incumbents have a virtual choke hold on political races—especially for Congress.”

As I spoke, all doubt on my part departed.

“This very interesting congressional race in Texas is one that’s completely under the radar. The national Republican Party won’t touch it. They say this seat is unwinnable, and they won’t risk any more time, energy, or money on trying to get it. The state Republican Party is focused on other seats, and the local party is totally demoralized by past defeats to this guy.

“But the Republican leadership is dead wrong and missing an incredible opportunity by ignoring my candidacy. If they aren’t going to help me, then at least get out of the way and stop telling people *not* to give to this race that they perceive as hopeless. And yes, I’m aware enough to understand the lay of the land, and I know that what I’m trying to do is difficult, but it absolutely can be done. And here’s why.”

Those eating had stopped; those shuffling papers looked up. I had their attention.

“I’m currently a small business owner in Waco. I’ve also been involved in local politics for a lot of years. But more importantly, I’m a former TV political reporter who knows and understands what I’m talking about. This is a seat we can flip over to the Republican column in the tight battle for the House.

“Here’s the key: This district is currently sixty-five percent Republican based on statewide and national election results. The only reason the long-time current Democrat has been winning is because of the power of his incumbency and his ability to fool

enough Republican voters into thinking he's actually a conservative Democrat. He's not and never was.

"You may have heard of him. His name is Chet Edwards. He was actually on Barack Obama's short list for vice president, at the suggestion of none other than Nancy Pelosi."

A number raised their eyebrows and glanced around the room at one another.

"But that prestigious honor—and I use that term loosely—is what has turned this completely around. I can tell you for a fact, Obama has absolutely no chance in Texas, and my opponent has now been outed as the Liberal he is, even though he's always passed himself off as a conservative in a district that is one of the most conservative in the country.

"Most candidates in those proverbial 'unwinnable' races have to overcome heavy Democrat numbers to win. I don't! In this case, all I have to do is convince enough Republican voters to stay Republican—and we're only talking about six percent of that group. I'm telling you, this seat is there for the taking.

"As I said, the party has washed their hands of this one. We've got a great dedicated grassroots organization on the ground, but we can't get any institutional financing or strategic support.

"I'm here asking for your help.

"Give me a chance to stand up to Pelosi and the Left and become one more voice for the preservation of the greatest nation on the face of the earth. I was told I was crazy for taking on this impossible battle, and in the experts' eyes, maybe I am. However, when you're doing what's right and the life of your country is at stake, you fight whatever battles you need to, no matter how hopeless they appear.

"I'm also dangerous—dangerous to the status quo and the business-as-usual crowd now running Washington, because I'm an idealist. Not some crazy, wild-eyed nut-job tilting at windmills, but a reasonable, clear-visioned fighter with a steely resolve to join other conservative idealists who understand the gravity of the danger this country is now in. I don't need a new job, career, or adventure. I'm in this race because I'm an idealist, and idealists aren't easily compromised or corrupted in a place like Washington.

"It may seem impossible, but with just a little help we'll win it. We may win it *without* any help, but I hope you'll join me in this fight.

"This is your chance to make a real difference. This is *our* chance to steal a seat from the unsuspecting Democrats and the incumbent Chet Edwards. This is really a fight to win back traditional American values."