

Thad McCotter's White House bid: A long shot to keep an eye on



U.S. Rep. Thaddeus McCotter: The Republican from Livonia is well aware of the hurdles in his presidential bid. / CARLOS OSORIO/Associated Press

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WASHINGTON -- Politically, Livonia has been very, very good to Thad McCotter: From the Wayne County Commission to the state Senate and then Congress, McCotter's political base has served him well.

Now, he gets to see how he plays on the road.

McCotter, 45, a five-term Republican, got a pop of attention after announcing he was running for president a week ago. But that's gone now, leaving him still virtually unknown among a crowded field of candidates.

"The reality is Congressman McCotter will have difficulty catching up to those already on the ground," said David Redlawsk, a professor at the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University in New Jersey and an expert on the first-in-the-nation Iowa caucuses.

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No one's giving McCotter any kind of shot to win, and he's well aware of the hurdles he faces. But he wants to see if his message -- a conservatism that rails against Wall Street bailouts while talking up the need for a revival in U.S. manufacturing -- resonates.

The challenge will be getting voters to listen.

"Nobody knows him. He's not been on even the faintest of radars," said David Yepsen, director of the Paul Simon Public Policy Institute in Illinois.

McCotter plays up his Michigan roots

WASHINGTON -- Thad McCotter's mother, Joan, remembers when she was the political star of the family.

It didn't last long.

Though she spent years on the Livonia City Council and then as city clerk, her son Thaddeus George became the top McCotter family politician soon after winning a spot on the Schoolcraft College Board of Trustees in the late 1980s.

He went from there to being one of two Republicans on the Wayne

County Commission then to a state Senate seat. One term in Lansing and he moved to Congress, where he has been for a decade.

"I never underestimate him," said Joan McCotter, 76, who still lives in the Livonia home where she raised her boys, "and I don't think other people should, either."

It's certain, however, that people will underestimate him, now that he has entered the Republican field as one of the longest of long shots for the 2012 presidential nomination. With virtually no name recognition nationally, he's left trying to raise money and his stature, hoping his message finds traction in early voting states such as Iowa and New Hampshire and differentiates him from the field.

The experts are scratching their heads.

"You've got to wonder just what he's doing here," said David Yepsen, former chief political writer for the Des Moines Register, now with the Paul Simon Public Policy Institute.

Dante Scala, a faculty fellow at the University of New Hampshire, had to look McCotter up in Almanac of American Politics to figure out who he was.

McCotter, a lanky, balding 45-year-old, is known at least as well for his dry, sardonic wit, appearances on FOX-TV's "Red Eye" and guitar-playing talents with fellow congressmen in a band called the Second Amendments as for his policy. But he may have a secret weapon:

Southeastern Michigan.

Since he announced his candidacy June 30, McCotter's campaign has said that the experience of southeastern Michigan -- the loss of jobs, the upheaval that hit the auto industry -- will be a centerpiece of his efforts. Far from running from his vote for the auto rescue and his support of labor issues in the past, McCotter -- who is otherwise a conservative's conservative -- will use them to differentiate himself.

For instance, while some candidates defend the bailouts of financial institutions on Wall Street, McCotter says it was those same banks that froze credit and forced the automakers to come begging to Congress. And credit still is only dripping, a fact he doesn't hear much from the rest of the field.

As for voting for labor-friendly measures such as a minimum-wage hike or collective bargaining agreements on government jobs, he's not apologizing -- not coming as he does from a largely blue-collar area.

"I'm pro-worker. I don't differentiate, I want people to work," he said. "I'm certainly not anti-labor."

"I'm sorry I can draw people who normally vote Democrat to vote Republican," McCotter added. "The same can be said of Reagan."

Although he is a staunch Catholic, McCotter also has voted for legislation that some religious and family groups said gave protections to homosexuals. As he told the Free Press, "I don't want an employer going through anyone's private sexual life."

But his critics say it adds up to a conservative not worthy of the name.

"The last thing this field of candidates needs is another fake conservative whose campaign rhetoric does not match how he actually voted," said Gary Glenn, chairman of the Midland-based Campaign for Michigan Families PAC.

Making his name in Michigan

McCotter's parents named him Thaddeus because Joan got pregnant at age 30 -- late for the time -- and she and her husband, a former University of Detroit football star and, like her, a special education teacher, prayed to St. Jude Thaddeus for a healthy child.

What they got was a voracious reader, a son who -- by fifth grade -- would rather read U.S. News & World Report than do the macrame being taught in class; who, when he was told at 10 that he couldn't see the movie "Jaws," instead read the Peter Benchley book.

He played football at Detroit Catholic Central, learned to play guitar and wrote songs. He became a class leader, too. And he began to develop a biting wit -- he and a friend staged a skit that cast as an evildoer a character similar to the school's dean.

There were no encores.

His mother remembers Livonia in the 1980s, like the stereotype of 1950s America: "Parents went off to Little League games and families went to picnics and you could walk the streets at night and not worry about anything."

Her husband (who died in 1984) was a Truman Democrat; she was a Republican. Thaddeus, who earned his bachelor's and law degrees from the University of Detroit, took after her politically, making his first big move after volunteering for former U.S. Rep. Carl Pursell and getting elected as a precinct delegate, to run against former Plymouth Township Supervisor Maurice Breen for Wayne County commissioner in 1992.

McCotter won and made a name for himself spearheading a push to require 60% of the voters to sign off on any tax increases. Then, in 1998, he replaced Republican state Sen. Robert Geake. In Lansing, he worked to weed out antiquated laws, pushed (unsuccessfully) for a state poet laureate (he wanted Bob Seger) and, more substantively, oversaw a panel that recommended the ouster of David Jaye, a fellow Republican who came under fire after allegations he hit his fiancée and had several drunken-driving convictions.

In Congress, McCotter's accomplishments have been mostly resolutions he's sponsored, raising his stature as a defender of allies in the Middle East and a supporter of manufacturing. He rose to become head of the Republican Policy Committee before suggesting it be disbanded as a show that the GOP was willing to cut its own to reduce spending.

"I appreciate his integrity, his honesty and his work ethic," said Paul Rzepecki, a painting contractor from Plymouth who is one of McCotter's closest friends from high school. "Of course, you're surprised anytime you know someone who is running for president."

Of the \$5.4 million in campaign contributions McCotter has raised during his congressional years, more than \$190,000 has been from unions, according to the Center for Responsive Politics.

Offering a change for GOP

McCotter is counting on his differences to make a difference -- and just about everyone says if he's to make any kind of impact, his first task is to be heard, by anyone, beginning in Iowa (leading up to the straw poll in Ames on Aug. 13) and in New Hampshire. He'll have to battle to be included in debates until he finds support in the polls -- if he can.

Make no mistake, McCotter is a conservative, preaching a principled brand of tea party politics. Government regulations strangle business, he says, and taxes ruin the ability to create jobs. Moral relativism, he intones, is a cancer on the family and the

nation.

But when it comes to fair trade, the Chinese threat and the need for worker protections and more manufacturing, he may find room for his message to be heard -- if he can find a way to get on the stage with the other candidates.

"It's a big 'if,' " he acknowledged. "I very much understand the nature of it."

But he said he has to give his message a chance because he's not hearing it from the others. The party, he said, hasn't won a popular majority in a presidential election since 1988 -- not counting 2004, which he considers a security election, not based on the economy.

The GOP needs to change, he said, and stop allowing American jobs to go overseas.

"The majority of Republicans are not happy with the field," he said. "Whether they're happy with me remains to be seen."

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