



Podcast Transcript

The Cloakroom with Peter Roskam: Featuring Congressman Tom Cole, R-OK

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Guest: Peter Roskam and Congressman Tom Cole, R-OK, **Host:** Leeann Lee

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- Lee: Welcome to The Cloak Room with Peter Roskam. Former Congressman Peter Roskam leads BakerHostetler's Federal Policy team. Through interviews with leading members of Congress, Peter provides an insightful first-hand view into the latest policy and political debates on Capitol Hill. In today's episode of The Cloakroom with Peter Roskam, Peter interviews Congressman Tom Cole, a Republican from Oklahoma. Cole is the chairman of the House Appropriations Committee. Peter and Cole discuss the challenges of keeping the federal government funded in a highly charged partisan environment and only months before the midterm congressional elections. Let's listen in to The Cloakroom with Peter Roskam.
- Roskam: Chairman Tom Cole, I'm delighted to be in your hideaway here in the Capitol. It is a very cool space. It does smell like this is the source of the tobacco skiff, as I'm told it is called.
- Cole: Cigar skiff.
- Roskam: Cigar skiff, where cigar smokers will gather under your warm embrace and your hospitality.
- Cole: Happy to have them.
- Roskam: You and I have known each other about 20 years.
- Cole: Yeah.

Roskam: And I remember when you came in and campaigned for me in 2006 when I first came to Congress. You had been in Congress two terms before that and were active and political. But your origin story goes way back. And I want to touch on that and then get some insight from you in this conversation, Tom, about how you've approached governing and how is it that you've been successful and influential because everybody knows you are a person of consequence and when you say things, it is significant and you're able to move legislation. And that is an incredible accomplishment. But your origin story goes way back. You grew up in a political family.

Cole: Correct.

Roskam: You grew up in a military family.

Cole: Correct.

Roskam: Your mom was a state rep and an active member of the Chickasaw Nation.

Cole: And a state senator as well and a mayor.

Roskam: Okay. So, take, what was it that when you were a young kid growing up in and around the influence of your folks and in this environment where you said, you know what? I think I want to go in this direction. Or did you at that point?

Cole: Well, I did not. Look, I had a PhD in British history. I was going to be a college history professor. But while I was in the pursuit of that, my mother had become a political activist. She grew up in a democratic family, in a democratic state. But as my dad was military, she moved around. She said, gosh, every place that there's two parties, government seems a lot better and a lot more transparent. And she was, I just think, naturally interested in politics. Her grandfather had been the last elected treasurer of the Chickasaw Nation before Dawes Commission and Oklahoma statehood. His father had been an elected Supreme Court clerk, tribal Supreme Court clerk. So, there's a lot of tradition of this.

And so she got active. My dad retired out in 60. She got actively involved in local politics. And she was a worker bee, precinct chairman, then a county officer, then the state committee woman. She did all that stuff. And they finally talked her into running for the state legislature in an area that was very heavily Democrat. And her first race was in '76. I was in graduate school. I lived immediately adjacent to her district, which went around Norman and up into our hometown of Moore. I was in Norman at OU. And I did a couple things in the campaign, put out some signs, but it's like, oh, me knock doors, me do this. And I will tell you, the worst place on the planet to be is your mother's watch party the night you lose, very close, and you haven't done very much.

And so, we used to have, our family, my wife and I would have Sunday dinner with my parents because they had a washing machine and magically my dad would come out and fill up the car, help the kid along a little bit. And a few weeks after the election, we were talking over dinner and I said, I think I understand why

you lost. And she's just like, yeah, really kid? Why? And I said, because I think you tried to be the candidate and the campaign manager both, which is a normal first-time candidate mistake, particularly when you're focused on a local race. And I said, if you ever do this again, I'll learn how to run a campaign. I think you'd win. You just didn't have enough time to reach out and interact with voters, because she was supremely good at working with people. And so, February of '78 rolls around. I'm in London on Fulbright Fellowship, and my mother gets in touch with me and goes, when are you coming home? I'm running.

Roskam: Wow.

Cole: And she knew I was coming back in June. I was teaching European history courses at the University of Oklahoma. And so, I came back, went to a little state party sponsored campaign manager school for two days, and met with my academic advisors and told them, look, I'm going to teach the classes because I need the money but I'm not going to do anything else on my dissertation from now to November. And they were great about it. They said, fine, you're our best student. Okay. And so I put together a campaign and she won that time. And not because I was great, but because she got to be a full-time candidate, which she excelled at. And I fell in love with it. I liked doing it and when I was a kid in high school and college, I was a pretty decent football player, D3, not serious football. But I like team sports, and that is what politics really is. It is a team, it is an adult team sport.

Roskam: What was your next step after that?

Cole: After that, well, after she wins her campaign, I just stay active. And I start running races, little school board races or a special county commissioner race. And I got a reputation as being pretty good. And finally, one of my clients, because I was at a critical point dissertation and I said, I really don't have time. Guy was running a county commissioner race and he was, his son and I had played football together. And he goes, well, I'll pay you. And I said, you can make money doing this? And it is like \$100 a week or something like that. I said, well, yeah, I'll do that. And he won. And I got a call from the state party chairman going into the 1980 campaign. And he said, will you take a year out of academic life and come and be the executive director of the state party? And I thought, it paid a lot better than being a graduate student. And I thought, well, that is fun. And Don Nichols was running for the Senate. And mom had become good friends in the state legislature. Ronald Reagan's running, my kind of boy.

Roskam: Oh, yeah.

Cole: We have a great election cycle. And we win. And frankly, I just, there was always another political job. I mean, I went and worked as a deputy campaign manager in a long shot governor's race in '82. We won the nomination, but we got creamed in the general. Then immediately after that, Congressman Mickey Edwards, who became the 4th ranking leader in the Republican Party. It was the only Republican congressman in Oklahoma at the time, called and they'd redistricted. He had a new area and he said, I needed a field rep that is got a

political bend. Would you come do that? So, I did that, became his district director, ran the Reagan campaign in Oklahoma, which is like being a jockey on Secretariat. I mean, it is not the jockey, it is the horse. And I had a pretty damn good horse.

And then after that, become state chairman in Oklahoma. And so, rose up to the partisan ranks that way. I've done two terms, very successful. We had the most, it is actually when I met Mitch Daniels, because he was White House political director after the '86 race. We won, Nichols got reelected, which was a big deal, because we'd lost the Senate that year. But as a freshman senator, he had actually expanded his deal. We picked up a governor's race for the first time in 20 years. We picked up a second congressional seat with Jim Inhofe, one state. So we had the most successful election in America if you were a Republican in '86.

Mitch actually called me. I walked in the office the morning after the '86 election and he goes, my secretary says, hey, the White House political director just called here for you. And I get on the phone and Daniels is on the other end of the line. He goes, Chairman, I don't know what the hell you did, but I got to put the President of the United States in front of a press conference, and we don't have very many good things to talk about except Oklahoma. Could you send everything up for talking points? We did that, but after I did that, I did another two years as state chair, and then my mom decided to retire. She later came back, but to retire from the state Senate in Oklahoma. My dad had Alzheimer's, and my grandmother was very ill and living with them and it was just too much.

And so I won her state Senate. At that time, it was the most expensive state Senate race in Oklahoma history because all the Democrats, all over the state hated me for having been a pretty successful Republican chairman. A lot of these guys are now really good friends of mine.

Roskam: Of course they are.

Cole: But I won that seat. Started out, and when I'd been state chairman, I'd become very good friends with Spencer Abraham, later United States Senator from Michigan, later Cabinet Secretary. Spence and I were the two youngest state chairmen in America. And so there was, everybody else was older than us. So, we became good buddies. And after that election, or after '90, Guy Vanderjak, who was the longest serving chairman of the NRCC in history, needed to clean the place up and they hadn't had any good elections in a while. So he brought Spencer over as what was called co-chairman. And he called me and said, you need to come up to D.C. I said, I'm not, I said, I'm in the state Senate. I had a political firm that my political director and finance director and I had set up, still exists. I still own a piece of it. Made us all a lot of money over the years. But I said, I've got my new company. Well, 30 days later, I was in D.C. _____ of the NRCC. So came up that way. And then went back to Oklahoma for the '94 cycle. We won everything. JC Watts was one of our clients. Frank Lucas was one of our clients. Steve Largett, Tom Coburn.

Roskam: These are big names. Yeah.

Cole: Frank Keating is a governor.

Roskam: Yeah.

Cole: I was his principal political guy. And so, again, I'm going along doing that, became Secretary of State, which is an appointed position in Oklahoma. And really not heavily involved in elections. It is really, I turned it into being the consigliere for the governor. And come 19, we win the re-election. All my clients were doing good. And all of a sudden, Jim Nicholson, who had become a good friend of mine, we were on the national, he calls me up and says, I need you to, we didn't have very good 1998, if you remember. And he said, I need you to come up here and be my chief of staff to the Republican National Committee. I said, I'm not going to do that. I did. And in 2000, it was the first time in 48 years, the Republican Party wins the presidency...

Roskam: Yeah.

Cole: ...the Senate, the House...

Roskam: Yeah.

Cole: ...in single election. U.S. Chamber comes over, we need you to do our, become our top political guy. And I remember the guy that Steve Hart was a lobbyist and the leader of Williams and Jensen at the time. He was the one doing the recruiting. And I said, Steve, I mean, I'm going home. I've got other things to do. And he said, well, how much would it cost to buy half your time where you spent half your time here, half your time in Oklahoma? And so, I named what I thought was a, I said, you can't afford it, a ridiculous figure. And he said, oh, I can do that. I mean, what a dummy I was, but it was the highest six figures I'd ever been paid. So I did that and thought, okay, the rest of my career is doing this, running campaigns, doing the political stuff. And my star client really in many ways was JC Watts, who was one of the best natural politicians I ever met, only the second African-American Republican elected in the 20th century. The only other one was Senator Brooks from Massachusetts. And so, but JC is rising here, becomes conference chairs, third term, beats Boehner. Right. And, but he decides after his fourth term, or in that time frame, she decided for a fifth, not to run. because he needed to go make money, which by the way, he's done fabulously well.

Roskam: How nice for him.

Cole: Oh my God. He's got a 3,000 acre ranch back in Oklahoma. He picks his clients, six on the awards, done well. But I was up here on my chamber gig and his chief called me and said, hey, boss wants to have dinner with you tonight. And he told me he wasn't going to run. I said, well, I'm going to spend the next. And he said, you need to run. Said I don't want to do that. But I'm going to spend my time trying to get you to change. I actually talked to Speaker Astrid at the time, and he

goes, I'd gotten to know him when I was in RCCED. And he goes, Tom, your job is to talk JC into running again. And if you don't, then you have to run.

Roskam: Oh, man.

Cole: And so, Karl Rove called all these guys once we couldn't get JC to run again. And I thought, well, here I am. This was, He decided late, so it is late June of 2002. And I knew nobody else could win that seat. Only JC could have won it, first Republican to ever hold it. It was registered over 60%.

Roskam: Yeah. When was the primary?

Cole: The primary was in July. So this is happening. And so, it is like this all happening. But I'd already built all of his staff.

Roskam: Right.

Cole: All of his.

Roskam: All the infrastructure.

Cole: Yeah. And so, I decided, well, it is only 17 weeks from now to November. I've got the apparatus in place. If it doesn't work out, I talked to the guy, Tom Donahue, who was over at the chamber running. He said, I'll keep you on halftime. And if you lose, you come back here. If you win, you take a big pay cut and you're in Congress.

Roskam: Right.

Cole: So I decided I would make the race. It was a targeted NRCC race. I won it. And stumbled here, but it was never part of a master plan. It was always just something that would open up.

Roskam: The next thing.

Cole: And yeah, so I ended up coming here. I thought I'd be here six to 10 years and 24 years later, I'm still here.

Roskam: It seems a pretty consistent story. So let me ask you a couple of questions. You show up here in 2002. I'll call these the good old days.

Cole: They were.

Roskam: So, there is a bit of nostalgia about them, but there was a disposition to the House Republicans at that time, and you would have fit right in. And you had a relationship with the speaker, a friendship, or...

Cole: _____, all those guys.

Roskam: All those guys, they're your people. So you fit right in. We lose the majority in 2006. Regain it in 2010. You're in the middle of that. You're the chairman of the NRCC for...

Cole: Well, only for the first two years.

Roskam: Okay.

Cole: Because in 2006, as you alluded to in our previous conversation, Boehner and Blunt run against one another. I'm the only deputy WIP. Back then becoming a deputy WIP was a big deal. And I was, my second term, I'm the only person in our class, which was a big class, that Blunt has tapped as a deputy WIP. Nobody else made it before their fourth term. And so, I'm close to him, but I was also close, I knew Boehner, again, when I was doing chamber work and the good, great guy, I was honest. I asked to go to his committee, as a Freshman. So, but I...

Roskam: That is a tortured position, by the way. So you got a relationship with both of these guys, but you went with Blunt?

Cole: I went with Blunt, which was decision I've never regretted, but it really upset Boehner. So he tried to beat me in '06. I ran for NRCC chair. And once I'd chosen Blunt, which again, all that was happening separately. He never forgot, well, he didn't forget it then. So he tried to beat me for NRCC chair. He couldn't, but come 2008, we had no difficulty.

Roskam: You guys ultimately reconciled.

Cole: Oh yeah. No, I consider him a very good friend but for about two years, I was so deep in the doghouse, I couldn't get my snout out the door. But you just go back to work. You raise money for people, you work hard, you play with the team. And literally the day before the new majority showed up, we were having a conference. And he gets up and he is going down, he is thanking Eric Cantor and he is getting down the list of all those guys that had all played critical roles in coming back. And he said, and he gets to NRCC chair, which was Pete Sessions, good friend of mine, but we ran against one other twice. I ran one the first time, second time, I withdrew pretty dramatically right on the eve of the deal. I think I was still in the race, but the speaker was the leader, who was openly opposed to me. And I said, this isn't a good thing. We're going to stay adversaries. So I stepped back from that.

But anyway, Boehner gets up in 2010 at this last conference before we bring the new guys in to square in. He said, hey, by the way, two years ago, they're talking to the conference. There was an NRCC race, and I got in it in a very big way. I mean, publicly endorsed, he has to be a leadership race. And my guy won. But I got to say, nobody's done more the last two years to help us become a majority than Tom Cole. I chaired two dues drives for the NRCC along with Kevin Brady and we were called the Dues Brothers because I was tall and he was a little bit shorter.

But so that got me back and I got to the approach committee where I wanted to go. And that had actually happened two years before that. I remember having discussions where if I gave up the NRCC. I wanted to be on Approps and there was no deal cut or anything like that. But I remember talking to Ken Calvert at the time, very good friends. Obviously, I was ED of the NRCC when he won in '92 and we're the night before I pulled out. And he says, Tom, I don't know if you'll win or lose tomorrow. I'm making my pitch. He'd been one of my WIPs the first time around. And he goes, but I do know John Boehner is going to be the next leader. So you need to get out of this and come over to the Appropriations Committee. You and I will travel the world. We'll do Approps _____ together.

It is actually pretty good advice. Jerry Lewis, who was in my corner and helping me, was the Republican ranking member and ultimately chairman of the Appropriations Committee. He gave me the same advice. Interestingly enough, I'd watched him lose to Dick Armey when I was over at the chamber and he lost by three votes. Gingrich was openly against him. But he was reminiscing about that. And he said, Tom, I'll give you a piece of advice. I did all that leadership stuff. I was running the edge. I was nose to nose with Gingrich. And when I lost a lot of my people thought it was the end of the world. I did too. But I went over the, I took my job seriously at Approps and I found that I enjoyed being an appropriator. First, he chaired it, he chaired defense Approps, becomes chairman of the whole deal. And so you should do the same thing. So I thought about it. I did that. And got on that track as the legislative end of it. Actually, the same advice I gave Kathy McMorris Rogers after she got knocked out in a conference chair's race to Liz Cheney.

Roskam: Yup.

Cole: I remember going to see her and saying, look, you think this is the end of the world?

Roskam: Right.

Cole: I can tell you what happened.

Roskam: Right.

Cole: You're going to love energy and commerce being a legislator.

Roskam: Sun is going to come up.

Cole: Yeah, and it did. And she became chairman of that committee. Would have won a third term had she decided not to retire. But you just don't quit in the business. You just, there is always a, we get up the next day. I remember talking to my chief after we lost the NRCC race where I would brew. And we come back and I said, well, what do you think we do now? Name is Sean Murphy, since sadly died of a heart attack when he was my chief. But he says, we make friends.

Roskam: Yeah.

Cole: Just make friends. That is the only thing.

Roskam: That seems to me, listening to this, Tom, that seems to me like an inflection point. And I want to just press in on that. So, as you, that experience and the incredible partisan background that you had has to have had an influence on how you approach this role now as Chairman of the Appropriations Committee. Because I can tell you reputationally, even though you are a partisan Republican. I mean, you're a pure breed, all these campaigns, all these races, all this fundraising and sharp elbowed political activity. And yet you've got Democrats that really think highly of you and trust you and are willing to interact with you in a very, very significant way.

What is it? And I was, when I was talking about having this conversation with you to others, I said, there is a lot of people that think Tom Cole is successful because he is nice to his counterpart, Rosa DeLauro, who is the ranking Democrat on the Appropriations Committee. And yes, he is nice to her. Yes, he treats her with respect. But there is so much more to the success of being able to put together these incredibly complicated bills in ways that you can get as much bipartisan support as possible. And I think it is unusual. You just don't see that a lot. How, when the different classes have come in, so in the group of 2010, the Tea Party group comes in, fire and brimstone, change the world and so forth, the analog equivalent of that, the Freedom Caucus and so forth, how have you approached those groups to try and, get them to yes on these various things?

Cole: Well, you usually know the things you can't work on together. You figure out the things you can't. I mean, Rosa and I, we first, we've been on a committee, but we hadn't gotten to know one of them. I became chairman of Labor H, most difficult one of the, I mean, nobody above me in seniority wanted to do it. We hadn't gotten a bill out in five years.

Roskam: The Labor, Health and Human Services Subcommittee.

Cole: Correct.

Roskam: Completely miserable, super controversial. It is a complete nightmare.

Cole: Yeah. So I called Rosa up, who had been the ranking member there, for a number of years. And I said, why don't we have breakfast? And we got to know one another. And I said, we're going to have a lot more hearings than we had because I want to figure out the things you and I and our committee could work on together. And we figured it out over several meetings. Well, we both like biomedical research, so we can do that. We both liked early childhood, which is a really good investment for the country to make. And finally, we both like to do things for first-generation college kids, because I think that changes the whole trajectory of a family. If you can get them into college, nobody is gone before. Everybody wants their kid to go, but they don't know much about it if they've never gone to college. I mean, that'd been my experience growing up.

And so, we found the areas we could work together. We got, obviously, eight times in a row, we'd always start in a different place. Four years I was chair, four she was chair. But we could always get to the same place where we could vote for final passage because we knew the areas we had. We're never, I'm A pro-life Republican. We're not going to agree on abortion. We can spend our time fighting about it. I'm not trying to move you. I'm not moving from my position. We're not going to agree on the gun issues. I'm a Second Amendment classic kind of Republican. And we're not going to agree on a lot of things, but you find the things you can work on together. You create some success in that. And I remember passing one of these bills. Once I got an e-mail from our old colleague, Rahm Emanuel, who we both served with. And he said, boy, you and Rosa DeLaura, who would have ever believed it? Talk about the odd couple.

But I've been, my mother was very good at that. I mean, she was very popular. She always served in the minority for a very democratic state. But she was usually ranked as one of the top legislators because she knew instinctively how to build a relationship with somebody that could be mutually successful. And it is not a matter of changing who you are. It is a matter of finding out the things you work on together and creating a situation where you both can be successful. And passing bills is really about finding something that everybody can feel like they had some success and part in. That is one of the things we do now as I do as Chairman. Look, I don't want to make all the decisions. I push the decision-making down to my Cardinals, my subcommittee chairman. I've got 12 of them. They're all good. And I say, you make the decisions. I'll give you an allocation. You stay within the allocation. I don't care what you do. I support my chairman. So they buy in the success.

And politically, I will tell you, on appropriations at least, and I think it is true on most things, the lower you make the decision, the lower down the food chain, number one, the more informed it is, because they're chairman of their committee, they're at every hearing, so are their counterparts, and the less political it is. When you move up, so even if you get to the top four on Approps, we're thinking politically. If it goes above our head, the guys making the decision, the speaker and all, number one, they don't usually know the the subject matter. Their staff is very good, but they're not as good as my Approps staff within the specific area. And it is always more political. It is about, well, I got to keep the Freedom Caucus happy, or I got to worry about the Midwest farmers or whatever. It is never what the hell a good policy is that you might even be able to work with on the other side. So again, sharing the decision making, letting the people on the other side. They got here the same way I did. They represent 800,000 people. They've got a set of interests. Frankly, most of them are not subject to a Republican challenge anyway. The world we live in now, 80 to 90 percent of us on each side, the main race is the primary. So, they're going to be here. You might as well learn to live with them and see if there's some areas you can work on together. _____ find that.

Roskam: Let me ask you one question before we go. Look over the horizon, 2028, not horse race stuff, but what is your view on where are these two parties going right now? And what do you think?

Cole: Well, they're far apart. They're as polarized and as partisanized as I've ever seen them. When I first got here, honestly, there were lots of Blue Dog Democrats. We served with lots. We're all gone.

Roskam: Right. Yeah.

Cole: I mean, we, Henry Cuellar is around here, my very good friend is the last. He is like a dinosaur wandering the halls.

Roskam: Yeah.

Cole: Cause he really is _____.

Roskam: Keith Schuler, all those guys.

Cole: Yeah. And so, I watched, again, when I won in 2002, right next door is Arkansas. Three of the four House members were Democrats, both senators were Democrats, very conservative Democrats. They're all Republican now, and it is unthinkable that a Democrat could beat any of them. When I got here, Connecticut, where Rosa was from, five members, three were Republicans. They're all gone now, and it is unthinkable a Republican is going to win there anytime soon. So the blue places in the country have gotten bluer. The red places have gotten redder and partisan alignment.

So the politics of how you pass something is very different than it was back in the early 2000s. And that transition probably was the sharpest beginning in 2010 with the rise of the Tea Party. But I'd also argue that Obama honestly radicalized the Democratic Party. It is so much further to the left now than when you and I first got here. They basically have driven out. Remember, there used to be a huge pro-life, no guns. They're all gone.

Roskam: Right.

Cole: So, they've ideologically, they've actually made us more conservative. Because again, I came from a state. We didn't, in the history of Oklahoma, we didn't take the State House until 2004. We didn't take the Senate until 2008. They were very narrowly divided. Today, we have 48 senators in Oklahoma. 41 of them are Republicans. 83 of the 101 of the House. And these were people that a generation before were part of the Democratic party. Most of my life, there was only one Republican congressman from Oklahoma, occasionally two out of then six, one senator. Now we own everything in the state.

And I see that up here, again, most of the Democrats I deal with, the majority is in play, but when I was Chief of Staff for the Republican National Committee, there were about 160 seats in the country that were decided within five points one way or the other. Today, there is maybe 40. So again, you govern differently than you did then. And then on top of that, of course, right now we have very narrow majorities, so that impacts things, but it always maximizes the strength of your fringe elements. All of a sudden, three or four votes matter. That is not always the case. When we passed the first Trump tax cuts in 2017, and we lost

like 12 or 14 Republicans, and we lost all the folks in the Northwest of New York over SALT, things like that. Can't do that anymore. At least not right now. So again, but political chess board changes, but good players are good players.

Roskam: That is so well said. And let's leave it there. So I have one suggestion, that if you ever have a podcast, you should call it the Cigar Skiff with Tom Cole. But for now, this is The Cloak Room with Peter Roskam, and I'm really grateful for your time today.

Cole: Oh, Peter, thank you. Great to see you again.

Roskam: Thanks, Tom.

Lee: Thank you, Peter and Congressman Cole. If you have any questions for Peter, his full contact information is in the show notes. As always, thanks for listening to BakerHosts and The Cloak Room with Peter Roskam.

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