

The making of Madison Cawthorn: How falsehoods helped propel the career of a new pro-Trump star of the far right

Cawthorn has emerged as one of the most visible figures among newly arrived House Republicans, who have promoted baseless assertions and pushed a radicalized ideology that has become a driving force in the GOP

By Michael Kranish
FEBRUARY 27, 2021

Madison Cawthorn was a 21-year-old freshman at a conservative Christian college when he spoke at chapel, testifying about his relationship with God. He talked emotionally about the day a car accident left him partially paralyzed and reliant on a wheelchair.

Cawthorn said a close friend had crashed the car in which he was a passenger and fled the scene, leaving him to die “in a fiery tomb.” Cawthorn was “declared dead,” he said in the 2017 speech at Patrick Henry College. He said he told doctors that he expected to recover and that he would “be at the Naval Academy by Christmas.”

Key parts of Cawthorn’s talk, however, were not true. The friend, Bradley Ledford, who has not previously spoken publicly about the chapel speech, said in an interview that Cawthorn’s account was false and that he pulled Cawthorn from the wreckage. An accident report obtained by The Washington Post said Cawthorn was “incapacitated,” not that he was declared dead. Cawthorn himself said in a lawsuit deposition, first reported by the news outlet AVL Watchdog, that he had been rejected by the Naval Academy before the crash.

Shortly after the speech, Cawthorn dropped out of the college after a single semester of mostly D’s, he said in the deposition, which was taken as part of a court case regarding insurance. Later, more than 150 former students signed a letter accusing him of being a sexual predator, which Cawthorn has denied.

Yet four years after Cawthorn spoke at the chapel, the portrait he sketched of his life provided the framework for his election in November as the youngest member of the U.S. House at the minimum age of 25 years old. A campaign video ad repeated his false claim that the car wreck had derailed his plans to attend the Naval Academy.

He promptly used his newfound fame to push baseless allegations about voting fraud on Twitter in a video viewed 4 million times, which President Donald Trump retweeted, saying, “Thank you Madison!” Then Cawthorn spoke at the Jan. 6 rally where a mob was incited to

storm the U.S. Capitol, again alleging fraud and extolling the crowd's courage in comparison with the "cowards" in Congress. He returned to the Capitol, where he falsely claimed that insurrectionists had been "paid by the Democratic machine."

Trump supporters make their way to the Capitol after the rally that featured Cawthorn as a speaker. (Gabriella Demczuk)

Today, less than two months after being sworn in, Cawthorn has emerged as one of the most visible figures among newly arrived publicity-hungry House Republicans, including Marjorie Taylor Greene of Georgia, who have promoted baseless assertions and pushed a radicalized ideology that has become a driving force in the GOP.

The story of Cawthorn's rise is, by any measure, an extraordinary accomplishment at a young age by a man who suffered a horrific injury. But an examination by The Post of how he ascended so quickly shows how even one of the most neophyte elected Republicans is adopting the Trump playbook, making false statements about his background, issuing baseless allegations about voter fraud and demonizing his political opponents.

Cawthorn won his campaign with a brief résumé that included working at a Chick-fil-A, a part-time role in a congressional office, the single semester of college and fledgling work as a real estate investor. He was boosted by a last-minute \$500,000 blitz by a political action committee that trashed his primary opponent as a "Never Trumper," which the opponent said was false. Cawthorn's campaign website said Sen. Cory Booker (D-N.J.), who is Black, wanted to "ruin" White males running for office, an assertion Booker denounced as "rank racism."

Cawthorn's election also came despite an extraordinary effort by former classmates and other alumni of Patrick Henry College urging that the voters of North Carolina's 11th Congressional District reject him on grounds of alleged sexual misconduct. Three women told The Post in on-the-record interviews that they objected to Cawthorn's behavior, with one saying he tried forcibly to kiss her after she rejected his advance.

Cawthorn declined an interview request. His press secretary, Micah Bock, who went to college with him, declined to respond directly to a list of questions that he had asked The Post to send to the congressman. Instead, Bock said that voters responded to such questions by electing Cawthorn, although some of the events — such as his speech before the storming of the U.S. Capitol — happened after the election.

The young North Carolinian now presents himself as the future of his party, brashly proclaiming that "I will put the Republican establishment on my shoulders and drag them kicking and screaming back to the Constitution." Cawthorn was a featured speaker Friday at the Conservative Political Action Conference in Orlando, attacking "vicious" opponents who

are “trying to take away all of our rights” and “are trying to turn this country into a communist ash heap.”

Cawthorn speaks with staff members before the joint session of Congress to confirm Biden's victory. (Gabriella Demczuk)

A crash in Florida

By his account, Cawthorn led a charmed life growing up in the Blue Ridge Mountains of western North Carolina. Handsome and athletic, he was home-schooled and played high school football. He sought admission to the U.S. Naval Academy under a process that enables a local member of Congress to recommend candidates.

That led Cawthorn to seek help from then-Rep. Mark Meadows (R-N.C), a conservative co-founder of the House Freedom Caucus. As it happened, Cawthorn was friends with Meadows's son, Blake. The senior Meadows agreed in December 2013 to nominate Cawthorn to the Naval Academy, but Cawthorn's acceptance depended on his grades, test scores and other measures.

After the Naval Academy rejected Cawthorn's application, he said in the deposition, he went on a spring break trip in Florida with his friend Ledford.

During the 2014 trip, Cawthorn, then 18, and Ledford, then 17, traded positions between the driver and passenger seats while the vehicle was moving on the highway, Cawthorn said in his deposition. At the time, Cawthorn said, he thought he was invincible, “didn't see any danger in it” and did it to save time.

The two were traveling back to North Carolina when Ledford nodded off while driving on Interstate 4 in Florida and crashed into a concrete construction barrier, Ledford said in a deposition. Ledford said Cawthorn, while wearing a seat belt harness, had been sleeping in a “laid back position” in a manner that the harness did not touch Cawthorn's body, and with “his feet being on the dash[board].”

Ledford said in his deposition that when the van crashed, he saw Cawthorn was unconscious. The doors were jammed, and the vehicle began to be enveloped in flames. Ledford said he exited through a window, “unbuckled Madison and proceeded to pull him out while a bystander came in and helped me.”

Cawthorn heads to the joint session of Congress. During his speech earlier in the day, the lawmaker alleged election fraud. (Gabriella Demczuk)

In his chapel address, however, Cawthorn told it this way: “He was my brother, my best friend. And he leaves me in a car to die in a fiery tomb. He runs to safety deep in the woods and just leaves me in a burning car as the flames start to lick my legs and curl up and burn my

left side. Fortunately, there was several bystanders who come by and they break the window open that they pulled me out to safety and they sat me down. The paramedics arrive and decided that I'm gone and I have no pulse, I have no breath. And I was, I was declared dead on the scene. For whatever reason, may it be adrenaline or divine intervention, I definitely believe it's the latter, I had a deep inhale of breath."

Ledford said in an interview with The Post that he raced to save his friend's life.

"That statement he made was false," Ledford said. "It hurt very badly that he would say something as false as that. That is not at all what happened. I pulled him out of the car the second that I was able to get out of the car."

Ledford said the two didn't talk for a couple of years. He said pressure regarding insurance claims caused Cawthorn to say "crazy things." Ledford said he has reconnected with Cawthorn, and "he told me that he didn't believe those things anymore."

In his deposition, Cawthorn did not say his friend left him for dead. Instead, he said, "I have no memory from the accident." An accident report and other records from the Florida Highway Patrol say Cawthorn was incapacitated and in critical condition, not that he was declared dead.

As a result of the accident, Cawthorn has limited use of his legs, uses a wheelchair, and received a \$3 million settlement from an insurance company, as well as other payments, and is seeking \$30 million more, according to court records from several lawsuits related to the case.

Cawthorn attributed his poor grades in college to "suffering from a brain injury after the accident definitely — I think it slowed my brain down a little bit," he said in the deposition. "Made me less intelligent. And the pain also made reading and studying very difficult."

At 25 years old, Cawthorn is the youngest member of the U.S. House. (Gabriella Demczuk)
'I told him no'

Cawthorn underwent multiple surgeries. Eventually, with a modified car, he was able to drive again, and he soon began asking young women to go on what they say he called "fun drives."

Katrina Krulikas, who was part of a home-schooling network that included Cawthorn, said she was 17 years old and he was 19 when they agreed to go on a date. She said in an interview that she got into his car and he drove to a "deserted part of town and he took me to the woods."

They got out of the car and Cawthorn talked about sex, which made her feel uncomfortable.

“All these very intimate, pressing questions that at the time, for someone that grew up in a very conservative community and hadn’t really talked about sex, I didn’t really know anyone having sex. ... It was a very religious community.”

Cawthorn then made his move from his wheelchair, Krulikas said.

“He tries to kiss me and I say no and I don’t let him kiss me,” she said. “We talk for like a little bit longer, like a few minutes. And then suddenly” he moved forward “as if to try to kiss me so quickly that I wouldn’t have a choice to say no or push him away. And at this point, I’m so startled that I fall back. My hair gets stuck in his chair. I’m ripping my hair out, trying to get out of the situation.”

Returning home, Krulikas said she texted a friend that she would never feel comfortable being alone with Cawthorn again. At the time, she didn’t complain because she felt she had “put myself in that situation.” But as she grew older, she said, she believed Cawthorn deserved blame, and “I definitely would classify it as sexual assault because he knew I said no.”

Krulikas first told of the encounter last August in World Magazine, a publication based in Asheville, N.C., that describes itself as “grounded in facts and biblical truth.”

Cawthorn, whose work experience had mainly been at a Chick-fil-A, got a part-time job working at the district office of then-Rep. Meadows.

Cawthorn told the Asheville Citizen-Times that he had worked “full time” for Meadows in 2015 and 2016. Congressional records show Cawthorn was listed as a part-time employee in 2015 and was paid about \$15,000. In 2016, he received about \$3,000 for part-time work.

Trump supporters gather on the National Mall on the day of the Capitol assault. (Gabriella Demczuk)

Cawthorn said in an earlier deposition he was accepted to Princeton and an online program at Harvard, along with other universities. He later revised his statements to say that he had not been admitted to Princeton and Harvard and that some of his statements about college admissions were “not accurate.”

Cawthorn eventually followed his friend Blake Meadows to become a student at Patrick Henry College, where the motto is “For Christ and Liberty.” In this conservative environment in Purcellville, Va., some female students said Cawthorn asked them to go on drives in his Dodge Challenger.

“He asked me to go on a ‘fun drive,’ ” said one classmate, Leah Petree. When she asked what

that meant, Cawthorn “insinuated some sexual activity.” Petree said, “I had a boyfriend so I was not going in the car with him. I told him no.”

Nonetheless, Cawthorn continued to “pressure me and badger me.” One day in October 2016, she said, she was in the cafeteria with other students when Cawthorn arrived with some of his friends. Petree said Cawthorn began asking another female student questions about sex that Petree deemed inappropriate, and she tried to defuse the situation.

“He got really angry and looked at me and screamed at me with a lot of anger,” Petree said. She recalled he said she was “just a little blonde, slutty American girl.’ And I remember that quote very well. ... I remember at the time my eyes stinging with tears, the whole table going quiet.”

Petree sent The Post a screenshot of a text conversation she later had with Cawthorn in which he complained that a man approached him and “said I called you a slut.” She texted back that she didn’t know the person’s identity, and he responded that “I have some old friends who would love to meet him.”

Some former students said in interviews that they were advised by classmates not to go on a drive with Cawthorn. But a student named Caitlin Coulter said in an interview that she was not aware of those concerns when Cawthorn asked her to ride with him in that fall semester of 2016. She accepted.

Cawthorn took Coulter to “somewhere very rural,” she said.

“There was a specific point in which he grew frustrated and I shut him down, basically — by not responding to some of the advances he was making. And he got upset and he turned the car around and drove very, like, violently is the best way I can think of to describe it. Violently back to campus. It was very scary. ... It seemed it was very clearly because he was upset that I had turned him down or refused his advances.”

After hurtling down back roads at speeds she said reached 70 or 80 miles an hour, they returned to campus and she never heard from him again.

Cawthorn addressed the allegations this way during the campaign: “If I have a daughter, I want her to grow up in a world where people know to explicitly ask before touching her. If I had a son, I want him to be able to grow up in a world where he would not be called a sexual predator for trying to kiss someone.”

It was shortly after Coulter went on the ride with Cawthorn that he testified at chapel about

his relationship with God. The semester was over. Cawthorn never returned and did not attend college elsewhere.

Before Cawthorn was elected, a group of his former college classmates urged voters to reject him on several grounds, including alleged sexual misconduct. (Gabriella Demczuk)

Running for Congress

Three years after Cawthorn dropped out of Patrick Henry College, Cawthorn learned Meadows planned to resign his seat to become chief of staff for President Donald Trump. Meadows and his wife, Debra, who was executive director of a political action committee called Women Right, backed their friend, Lynda Bennett, a real estate agent, in the Republican primary.

Cawthorn announced his candidacy. The 24-year-old was given little chance because of his youth and short résumé.

A campaign video ad said Cawthorn had planned to serve in the Navy “with a nomination to the U.S. Naval Academy in Annapolis. But all that changed in the spring of 2014 when tragedy struck.” His campaign website made a similar statement.

By his own admission, however, that was not true. He had been asked in his deposition whether the rejection by the Naval Academy “was before the accident?”

“It was, sir,” Cawthorn replied. That acknowledgment was not publicly known until after Cawthorn became the Republican nominee.

Campaign ad falsely claims a car wreck upset Cawthorn's plans to attend U.S. Naval Academy

An excerpt of the deposition in which Cawthorn admits he had been rejected by the Naval Academy before he was injured in a car crash. (Auto-Owners Insurance Company)
Bennett seemed the prohibitive favorite, given her backing by Mark and Debra Meadows. But Cawthorn said in a Facebook post in February 2020 that his campaign was thriving thanks to their son. He thanked “one of my closest friends, Blake Meadows,” for helping with the campaign. Blake Meadows did not respond to a request for comment.

Cawthorn also received crucial help from George Erwin Jr., a former sheriff of Henderson County and former executive director of the North Carolina Association of Chiefs of Police. Erwin helped the candidate gain endorsements from key law enforcement and political figures. He wrote on Facebook in February 2020 that “Congressman Cawthorn just has a sweet sound to it. I will do whatever I need to do to make this happen.”

Then came an extraordinary moment that turned the campaign in Cawthorn’s favor. Someone

released an edited audio clip of Bennett saying forcefully, “I’m a Never Trump person. I don’t want Trump. I’m Never Trump, not going to vote for him.”

Bennett promptly denied that she was a Never Trumper, and soon a fuller audio clip was released that seemed to back her assertion that she had been mimicking someone who would never vote for Trump. She led the primary field but state law required that she exceed 30 percent of the vote. That led to a runoff between her and the runner-up, Cawthorn.

Bennett again was the favorite. But Cawthorn got an extraordinary boost from an outside group, a Georgia-based political action committee called Protect Freedom that sought to elect candidates in the mold of Sen. Rand Paul (R-Ky.). The group’s largest contributor is Jeff Yass, a co-founder of the Pennsylvania-based investment company Susquehanna International Group, who gave the PAC a total of \$8.5 million in 2019 and 2020, according to federal election records. Yass declined to comment.

The committee poured \$500,000 into the race to support Cawthorn in the days before the runoff. The money was mainly spent on mailers and television ads that renewed the charge that Bennett was a Never Trumper.

Bennett said in an interview that the last-minute spending on what she called a “lie” devastated her campaign, and she ran an ad blaming “Madison Cawthorn’s DC friends.” She said it proved impossible to convince many people that she had been mocking a Never Trumper, even when Trump endorsed her just before the election.

Michael Biundo, a spokesman for Protect Freedom, said in an interview that he believed the committee’s advertising “played a big role in the race.” He said the committee was aware that an audio clip had been released in which Bennett said she was not a Never Trumper but nonetheless decided to air that charge.

“We stand by what we put out there,” he said.

With the committee’s help, Cawthorn beat Bennett by 31 points. He vowed to be the most pro-Trump member of Congress, and the president soon backed him effusively, saying he’s “a terrific young man. ... He’s going to be one of the greats.”

Trump supporters gather near the Washington Monument on Jan. 6. At the rally that day, Cawthorn accused Democrats of “trying to silence” voters’ voices. (Gabriella Demczuk) Embraced by Trump

After Cawthorn became the Republican nominee for the 11th District seat, his background was scrutinized by a local news outlet called AVL Watchdog, which first reported on the deposition in which Cawthorn acknowledged that he was rejected by the Naval Academy

before the accident.

Cawthorn attacked one of the outlet's reporters, Tom Fiedler, who previously had been editor in chief of the Miami Herald and dean of Boston University's College of Communication. Fiedler, who had a home in Asheville, had volunteered for Booker's 2020 Democratic presidential campaign.

Cawthorn responded to Fiedler's reporting by attacking his association with Booker. Fiedler "quit his academia job in Boston to work for non-white males, like Cory Booker, who aims to ruin white males running for office," a Cawthorn campaign website alleged, as first reported by the Bulwark. Booker denounced the comment.

Cawthorn responded by saying, "The syntax of our language was unclear and unfairly implied I was criticizing Cory Booker."

As Cawthorn headed to the general election, former classmates and other alumni at Patrick Henry College circulated the letter that leveled accusations against him.

"Cawthorn's time at PHC was marked by gross misconduct towards our female peers, public misrepresentation of his past, disorderly conduct that was against the school's student honor code, and self-admitted academic failings," the letter said. "During his brief time at the college, Cawthorn established a reputation for predatory behavior. ... We urge the voters of North Carolina to seriously reevaluate Madison Cawthorn's candidacy in light of who he really is."

After more than 150 alumni signed the letter, the organizers hoped it would lead to Cawthorn's defeat in the general election. He faced Democrat Moe Davis, a former director of the Air Force Judiciary.

Cawthorn, meanwhile, traveled to the Texas border on July 30 and, echoing the views of a radicalized, far-right ideology, alleged that there was "a large group of cartels, kidnapping our American children and then taking them to sell them on a slave market, a sex slave market." He said that "tens of thousands of our children" were taken in what he called "one of the greatest atrocities I can imagine," blaming the media for failing to focus on the matter.

There's no evidence that cartels have kidnapped large numbers of U.S. children and sold them on a slave market.

The Republican Party, meanwhile, saw Cawthorn as a star and gave him a coveted slot speaking on the third night of its national convention. Seeking to combat questions about his youth, Cawthorn said that if viewers didn't think young people could change the world, "you

don't know American history." He said that "my personal favorite, James Madison, was just 25 years old when he signed the Declaration of Independence."

In fact, Madison never signed the Declaration of Independence. He was known as the Father of the Constitution, which he signed.

Cawthorn speaks at the Jan. 6 rally. He urged the crowd to be part of a new Republican Party "that will go and fight." (Gabiella Demczuk)

'It's time to fight'

Running in a heavily Republican district, Cawthorn won by a 12-point margin against Davis, who said in an interview that his opponent "has got to be the least qualified member of Congress."

Cawthorn became one of the most loyal defenders of Trump, who claimed falsely that the 2020 election had been stolen from him. In a six-minute video posted to Twitter on Dec. 31, Cawthorn said, "My first act as a member of Congress will be to object to the electoral college certification of the 2020 election."

To justify his decision, he repeated a host of false and misleading claims about the election, accusing various state election officials of violating the law even though courts across the country and Trump's own attorney general, William P. Barr, rejected these allegations.

"Voter fraud is common in America. Those who tell you otherwise are lying," Cawthorn said in the video.

Cawthorn alleged that a number of states had violated the Constitution and their own laws. Cawthorn said "ballots were shoved into duffel bags and left in parks and gas stations." He said Nevada "allowed dead people and out-of-state voters to flood the electoral system," a baseless assertion. He said mail-in ballots "are wildly susceptible to fraud."

"Fact-check that," Cawthorn said, adding, "Do not let your vote be canceled by these bastards."

In fact, voter fraud is rare, mail-in ballots have been almost entirely free of fraud for decades, no widespread fraud was found in the fall election, and courts across the country dismissed more than 60 legal challenges filed by the Trump campaign.

Cawthorn's video, however, made an impression on one person in particular. Trump gleefully retweeted it on Jan. 1. (The Post asked Twitter whether Cawthorn's tweet met its civic integrity standards. After the inquiry on Feb. 11, Twitter attached the following statement to

Cawthorn's tweet: "This claim of election fraud is disputed, and this Tweet can't be replied to, Retweeted, or liked due to a risk of violence.")

Cawthorn was sworn in on Jan. 3 and he amped up his rhetoric, tweeting the following day that "the future of this Republic hinges on the actions of a solitary few. ... It's time to fight." He was invited to speak at the Jan. 6 rally and derided members of both parties.

"The Democrats, with all the fraud they have done in this election, the Republicans, hiding and not fighting, they are trying to silence your voice," Cawthorn said, castigating members of his own party who "have no backbone" and deriding "the cowards of Washington, D.C., that I serve with."

He urged the crowd to be part of a new Republican Party "that will go and fight. ... Make your voice heard, because, do we love Donald Trump? But my friends, we're not just doing this for Donald Trump, we are doing this for the Constitution. Our Constitution was violated."

Cawthorn then went to the Capitol and, after taking refuge from some of the same people who had listened to his address, called into the Charlie Kirk radio show and made an incendiary, baseless claim that Democrats were behind the insurrection.

Cawthorn sits in the House chamber after the joint session of Congress reconvened on Jan. 6. (Gabriella Demczuk)

"I believe this was agitators strategically placed inside of this group," Cawthorn said. "You can call them 'antifa,' you can call them people paid by the Democratic machine, but to make the Trump campaign, the Trump movement, look bad and to make this look like it was a violent outrage when really the battle is being fought by people like myself and other great patriots who were standing up against the establishment, standing up against this tyranny in our country." He said the storming of the Capitol was "disgusting, impermissible."

No evidence has emerged that Democrats or antifa, the anti-fascist protest movement, were behind the insurrection.

Cawthorn was among the 139 House Republicans who voted to object to the certification of some presidential election results. The Democratic Party of North Carolina's 11th District, which covers western parts of the state, has called for an investigation into what it calls Cawthorn's "seditious behavior."

As the blowback mounted, Cawthorn defended his actions but changed his tone. Asked about his rally speech during an interview on OZY, he said: "If I could go back, I wouldn't have changed any words that I did say, but I probably would have added some lines. I probably would have encouraged more peace."

Without any mention of his video baselessly alleging massive voting irregularities, he said that he hadn't promoted theories about fraudulent voting machines or "U-Hauls being backed up with tons of ballots and they were fraudulently marked. I couldn't have personally proved that ... so I definitely didn't try and feed into that narrative."

Erwin, the former sheriff who helped Cawthorn get endorsements, said in an interview that he increasingly is regretful for playing a crucial role in the election.

Erwin went on Facebook after the Capitol riot and wrote: "I apologize to all of my law enforcement friends, other politicians, family and friends — I was wrong, I misled you. When I saw [Cawthorn's] speech to the crowd in Washington I thought this is not good. ... Your words can incite or calm. I saw no calming words and people died and were injured."

Erwin confirmed that he wrote the post and expressed profound remorse. "I was filled with hope for him," Erwin said. "And that hope was dashed and it was crushed. And that's on me. That's why I had to apologize to folks."

Republican House leaders, meanwhile, rewarded Cawthorn with assignments that belied his background of a single college semester of mostly D's and rejection by the Naval Academy. He now serves on the Education Committee and the Veterans' Affairs Committee.

After the rally and the riot at the Capitol that followed, Cawthorn falsely claimed that insurrectionists had been "paid by the Democratic machine." (Gabriella Demczuk)
Editing by John Drescher. Photo editing by Natalia Jimenez. Design by Tara McCarty. Copy editing by Gilbert Dunkley and Frances Moody.

Alice Crites and Salvador Rizzo contributed to this report.