



Written by [R. Cort Kirkwood](#) on February 29, 2024

# Former Timesman: If You Like Chick-fil-A, You're Not Welcome at the Times; Newspaper Lied About Cotton Op-ed

At *The New York Times*, a writer who eats the wrong sandwich could well land in a Struggle Session.

And he'll find out pretty quickly, too, former *Times* opinion staff member Adam Rubenstein explained in an essay for *The Atlantic*.

But Rubenstein's shame at consuming Chick-fil-A is only the beginning of his account, a story so bizarre it sounds like dystopian fiction — or the arrest of a dissident for opposing the party line.

A token conservative at the newspaper, Rubenstein elaborated on the Soviet-like ideological war inside the *Times* after it published Arkansas GOP Senator Tom Cotton's "controversial" op-ed. Cotton had called on President Trump to invoke the Insurrection Act and deploy the Army to crush nationwide riots following the [overdose death](#) of George Floyd in May 2020.



Ajay Suresh/Wikimedia Commons

Synopsis: Ideological conformity at the *Times* is even worse than anyone thought.

"The fight over Cotton's op-ed was never about safety, or the facts, or the editing, or even the argument," [@RubensteinAdam](#) writes, "but control of the paper and who had it. In the end, all that mattered was that an example had been made." <https://t.co/9KkU9h0QdR>

— The Atlantic (@TheAtlantic) [February 28, 2024](#)

## No Chick-fil-A in This Building

Rubenstein opens with his story about orientation for new employees.

An "icebreaker" session involved picking a "Starburst out of a jar" and answering a question — in this case, what was his favorite sandwich.

"Russ & Daughters' Super Heebster came to mind, but I figured mentioning a \$19 sandwich wasn't a great way to win new friends," [he wrote](#). "So I blurted out, 'The spicy chicken sandwich from Chick-fil-A,' and considered the ice broken."

It was broken alright. Leaving aside the question of why grown adults are picking candy out of a jar and



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discussing their favorite foods as if they were in third grade, what Rubenstein next described would be unbelievable if he were not describing the 21st century *Times*:

The HR representative leading the orientation chided me: “We don’t do that here. They hate gay people.” People started snapping their fingers in acclamation. I hadn’t been thinking about the fact that Chick-fil-A was transgressive in liberal circles for its chairman’s opposition to gay marriage. “Not the politics, the chicken,” I quickly said, but it was too late. I sat down, ashamed.

Still, Rubenstein was gratified as a conservative to have landed a job.

He took seriously *Times*’ putative commitment to publishing “against-the-grain op-eds,” but “I learned in my two years at the *Times*” that diversity of opinion “was not a goal that everyone shared.” Indeed, he soon learned that the conservatives the *Times* published “tended to be ones agreeing with the liberal line,” and that “right-of-center submissions were treated differently.”

Indeed, leftists at the newspaper tried to block their publication, and ensured that conservative offerings were vetted by the highest editors.

### **The Cotton Op-ed**

That observation segued into the [Cotton op-ed of June 3, 2020](#).

Noting the destruction that Floyd Hoax rioters left in Los Angeles, that police cars in New York City were firebombed and police stations in Minneapolis and Portland set ablaze, [Rubenstein observed](#) that “many people felt that things were spiraling out of control.” Cotton was among them. He tweeted that President Trump should deploy crack troops from the Army’s “10th Mountain, 82nd Airborne, 1st Cav, 3rd Infantry—whatever it takes to restore order. No quarter for insurrectionists, anarchists, rioters, and looters.”

And, if necessary, the 10th Mountain, 82nd Airborne, 1st Cav, 3rd Infantry—whatever it takes to restore order. No quarter for insurrectionists, anarchists, rioters, and looters.

<https://t.co/OnNJmnDrYM>

— Tom Cotton (@TomCottonAR) [June 1, 2020](#)

The “no-quarter” line caused a stir, and so “Cotton’s office pitched me an op-ed about Twitter threatening to lock his account if he didn’t delete the original tweet,” Rubenstein explained.

But the *Times* didn’t want a debate about Twitter’s policies. Instead, editors asked for a piece about “the actual substance of his argument: In this case, does the president have the authority to invoke the Insurrection Act? Should he? Other editors who were consulted on the pitch found that argument worthwhile. I conveyed the reformulated idea to Cotton’s office, and his staff filed a draft early the next morning. We also had plans, as was our custom, to run arguments against Cotton’s view. And we already had.”

Rubenstein’s job was editing and fact-checking. He corrected what he thought wrong or “objectionable,” and included changes from other editors. Rubenstein and Cotton “exchanged multiple drafts,” and *Times* editors thoroughly vetted the piece.

When the op-ed ran, the hysterics began:



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Dozens of the paper's employees retweeted an identical, or near-identical, statement, workshopped on Slack and rubber-stamped by the NewsGuild of New York, which represents the newspaper's union (I was a member), claiming that "running this put Black @nytimes staff in danger."

It was an outlandish claim but next to impossible to rebut—how can you tell someone who says they're not safe that, in fact, they're fine? Did they know that in some states, troops had already been deployed to protect public safety? Were we reading the same op-ed? Were they serious?

The op-ed quickly became "a workplace-safety and racial-justice issue," and the *Times'* "Guild immediately started organizing against the op-ed and those responsible for it."

Many readers and New York Times staff members denounced The Times's publication of an opinion essay by Senator Tom Cotton, Republican of Arkansas, that called for a military response to protests. The Times union said that the Op-Ed "promotes hate."

<https://t.co/yG7CXoUz3c>

— The New York Times (@nytimes) [June 4, 2020](#)

The dust-up featured a reporter who confessed that he wouldn't quote Cotton because "his comments 'often represent neither a widely held majority opinion nor a well-thought-out minority opinion.'"

Some 1,500 employees joined the raging lynch mob that wanted Rubenstein fired, although a top editor backed him.

The newspaper then published an inaccurate story about the editing of the piece and the selection of photos for it. *The Washington Post* concluded that Rubenstein "shrugged off accuracy issues," a complete falsehood.

Publisher A.G. Sulzberger backed the decision to publish the op-ed, but later "caved and was claiming that a review had been conducted that found that 'a rushed editorial process' was responsible for an op-ed that 'did not meet our standards.'"

*Times* employees created a false narrative on Slack: Rubenstein went "rogue and published the article without any involvement of higher-ups."

The newspaper's television critic — hardly a sound judge of anything but *The Bachelor* — wrote on Slack that "we don't run pieces where serial killers tell us murdering is actually fun and great."

As if anyone would suggest such a thing.

### **Erroneous Note**

"An editors' note was appended to the op-ed," [Rubenstein wrote](#):

The note contains many errors, among them that the editorial process had been "rushed," that "senior editors were not sufficiently involved," and that facts in the article weren't quite right. Never mind, of course, that it wasn't rushed, that senior editors were deeply involved, and that there were no correctable errors. The note criticized Cotton's claim that "radicals like antifa are infiltrating protest marches," alleging that it had "not been substantiated."



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But the attorney general was on the record saying that antifa had done just that—a fact the *Times* eventually confirmed for itself.

Chief opinion editor James Bennet was forced to resign, and a “sensitivity” channel was created on Slack.

This is false and offensive.

I called for using military force as a backup—only if police are overwhelmed—to stop riots, not to be used against protesters.

If [@nytimes](#) has any decency left, they should retract this smear. <https://t.co/9qJLgWSwIP>

— Tom Cotton (@TomCottonAR) [June 7, 2020](#)

To show the newspaper’s hypocrisy, [Rubenstein offered](#) a list of op-eds by some rather unsavory, notorious people: Libyan strongman Muammar Qaddafi, Turkish authoritarian Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and Russian leader Vladimir Putin. Another voice was a “Chinese Communist Party mouthpiece.” But “none of those caused an uproar.”

Indeed, “on January 6, 2021, few people at *The New York Times* remarked on the fact that liberals were cheering on the deployment of National Guardsmen to stop rioting at the Capitol Building in Washington, D.C., the very thing Tom Cotton had advocated.”

The *Times*, the “[newspaper of record](#)” we are told, permitted pro-Communist reporter Walter Duranty to publish propaganda for Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin [that hid](#) the mass murder of millions.

In the person of reporter Herbert Matthews, the newspaper [was also a disinformation transmission belt](#) for Cuban communist revolutionary and mass murderer Fidel Castro.



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