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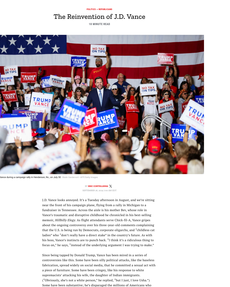
The Reinvention of J.D. Vance

BY ABBY VESOULIS



J.D. Vance during a campaign stop in Lancaster, Pa., on Aug. 3

+ VIEW CONTRIBUTORS
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J.D. Vance looks around. It's a Tuesday afternoon in August, and we're sitting in a booth at a Cracker Barrel in Lancaster, Pa., a Trump country town. Lancaster is Vance-ian: across the aisle is his mother Bev, whom he's Vance's inaugural and divorcee childhood he chronicled in his best-selling memoir, *Hillbilly Elegy*; to flight attendants serve Chick-fil-A, Vance jokes about the lingering controversy over his three-year old comments comparing Kamala Harris to a "childless cat lady" who's "miserable" and "doesn't care about kids." Vance's quip "hasn't really been a direct attack" on the country's future, he tells his boss, Vance's mentors are in pinch back. "I think it's a ridiculous thing to focus on," he says, "instead of the underlying argument I was trying to make."

Since being tapped by Donald Trump, Vance has been mired in a series of controversies, most of his own making. He's accused Harris of being "DEI" hire, fabrication, spread widely on social media, that he committed a sexual act with a piece of furniture. Some have been organic, like his response to white House reporter Jonathan Karl's question about Trump's relationship with *Playboy*'s Playmates, also a wide-ranging "gotcha." Vance's "Fact Check, Vance Vance," Vance has been ambivalent, he's disparaged the millions of Americans who don't have children, and some have been manufactured, Vance's willingness to spread the debunked claim—shot down by both local officials and the state's Republican governor—that Haitian immigrants in Ohio are eating pets and pets resulted in bomb threats and the harassment of legal immigrants by right-wing extremists. Surveys show public opinion of Vance has fallen since his debut as Trump's VP.

Vance's penchant for provocation has often obscured the art of ideas he's seeking to advance. The Ohio Senator has positioned himself at the vanguard of an emerging ideology often described as the "New Right" or "National Conservatism" that rejects the economic consensus of globalization and inequality. Vance says that decades of unfettered trade, increased immigration, and market consolidation have led to a loss of jobs and opportunity, the disorganization of families, and widening regional inequality, ceding too much cultural power in the hands of liberal elites and too much economic power in the hands of corporations. Vance's proposed remedies are a mix of tariffs, higher taxes for Republicans, rebates meant to ease over-heated rents or cultural issues is in tension with an economic agenda that has benefited the wealthy over the working class.

Donald Trump and Vance at a campaign rally in Fayetteville, N.C., on Aug. 17, 2024. Chris Chew—AP

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BY DAVID MARK CHANDLER

But for Vance's ideas to carry the day, he has to survive the critic. He has been a forceful tribune for much of Trump's agenda, including restrictive immigration policies, tariffs, and the overturning of Roe v. Wade. Vance's support for Trump's plan tearing up a crude business friendly Republican rule vows to cut taxes and regulations. He remedy sold some of the nation's multibillion dowers that he would lower them (or bankers to make them even richer. Since holding up the GOP nomination, Trump has ceded up to Billionaires such as Elon Musk, Peter Thiel, and David Sacks, who have, in the past, been critics of Vance their desire to quash renewed antitrust efforts, disempower unions, and restore farmers farm bargainers.

Vance's background spans which most complicated—and more interesting—than that portrait suggested. He grew up in Middletown, Ohio, with a single mother who struggled with addiction, and a "Mamaw" who was a Democrat. Vance's grandfather's effort to ensure the succession of their figures also ended through his mother's home. After high school, during which he sometimes lived with his grandparents, he joined the military and served as a combat correspondent in Iraq. From there, he attended Ohio State University and Yale Law School. In 2011, he married his longtime girlfriend, Usha Chilukuri, a Yale Law classmate. The right wing billionaire Peter Thiel, who hired him to work for one of his Silicon Valley venture capital firms after graduation.

At first, Vance was adamantly anti-Trump, calling him "cultural bankrupt" and "reprehensible." In a 2016 text message to a former Yale classmate, Vance wrote, "I think Trump is a terrible human being. I think he is a bad, bad, bad person. Worse than anybody in that final cadre of Republican candidates." Vance's Hillbilly Elegy gained him entry to more Republican circles, including a dinner with Trump's daughter Ivanka, which he wrote about in the New York Times. Vance says he voice evolved. He noticed, he says, how the elite audiences he encountered looked down on the people he grew up with, and how they characterized their own political bailiwick, covering the space for many of American workers.

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Gradually, Vance says, he came to relief against the policy orthodoxies that had prevailed for decades. Before Trump came along, both parties broadly supported free trade, immigration, and globalization, and opposed industrial decapitation, and muscular interventionism abroad. Vance was part of a generation skeptical of the effects of such policies. He grew up amid a "Democratic Party that was increasingly dominated by the Ivy League-based, the upscaled professionals." He believed the highest levels of economic concentration since the Gilded Age had ravaged Middle America. "There's a geographic element to economic growth that didn't exist before," he says, describing an economic system where "the best and brightest are increasingly sorted into the same places. As a result, we have a situation where people raising human is always trying to cure Alzheimer's disease engaged in social neuroscience because so many were gobbled up by Facebook.

Tucker Trump, who, there was this embedding going on both on the right and the left about neoliberalism—about unfettered trade, about market consolidation, about the importance of immigration, about the importance of the Ivy League in the American business. Vance's Project, "We's part of that Republican contingence." The core assumption of Bangsamoro—that government is the problem, that government is the problem, that government is the problem—gave ammunition to Democrats. Harris, Trump claims to represent an opportunity. It wasn't just there areas of policy alignment, Trump was ringing up against the political establishment, covering the space for many ideological movements to emerge.

Another factor in Vance's revelation was his conversion to Catholicism in 2019. Vance says he was "deeply impressed" by the Church's stance on life, family, marriage and the influence of intellectual heroes like Rene Girard. It was appealing not only for its social traditionalism but also for its vision of political economy. Vance's favorite encyclical, Pope Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum*, published an encyclical in 1891 that outlined the deleterious effects of unregulated markets on family and community. Allies say Vance's Catholic faith has influenced his approach to immigration, including his opposition to the Supreme Court's decision in Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization, the systemic forces grinding them down. "I think that over the years," says Sohrab Ahmari, a friend and leading critic of the New Right, "he's reached the exact conclusion of his own book."

Around this time, Vance met Tucker Carlson at a conference. The three-hrs here was struck by how Vance viewed hostility to a class that still sees him as a hillbilly. Carlson, who has spent his career mocking the Ivy League and southern Ohio, going to Yale Law School, being welcomed into this new world, being ridiculed by it, and then discovering "Carlson says, "that a lot of these people were just convenient frauds."

Vance's antipathy for them hardened during the pandemic. He had come to believe the government should lamentation the formation of families and promote child rearing. In his view, COVID-19 mitigation measures, like keeping kids out of school, revealed how profoundly indifferent our elites were to the family. I think unofficially at least little not reflection there was about all of the COVID-19 stuff, that the elite class just didn't care about the family," he recalls. Vance I think really has become explicitly antifamily and explicitly antichild."

Vance speaks to reporters on Sept. 4 during a visit to the Kentucky craft way Ben Fuqua—AP FOR TIME

After the pandemic, Vance became a regular on Carlson's show, then the more explicitly nationalist Steve Bannon's podcast, and eventually, Trump's rallies as an ally Dark, which both Vance and Carlson accuse of enacting conservative speech. "The problem with Google is not just its market power," Vance tells one of Bannon's guests, "it's the ideological manipulation." Vance's relation with President was Dance on Carlson's show and was impressed, in February 2021, when Trump was in exile after the Jan. 6 attack and Vance was eyeing a run for Senate, he wrote a piece for the Spectator, a British right-wing magazine, in suggestion of Carlson, Trump's editor-in-chief Vance, and the President Donald Wells, who all urged the ex-President to give one of his former critics a chance. For Vance, much was on the line, receiving Trump's backing was the easiest path to a run in the midterm GOP.

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When Vance walked into Trump's private office, there were primaries on the desk of Vance's part advisor, according to a source familiar with the meeting. Vance was worried about Trump's "Big Lie" that the election was stolen, which had brought into media misrepresentations. Over time, he said Trump, he came to realize that the policies Trump championed would help the people he were concerned about. Vance's pitch was that he was the candidate who was willing to stay in touch. Vance said Trump he seemed to want to be popular.

For much of the Ohio Senate primary, Vance trailed in the polls despite the support of Trump. He ultimately prevailed, in part because he was the candidate who was willing to stay in touch. Vance's pitch was that he was the candidate who was willing to stay in touch. Vance said Trump he seemed to want to be popular.

Vance raised Trump's self-differing from the position on the morning of July 13, 2024, when he was in Milwaukee, Trump shot hurt. "Maybe I should have been in Mexico." Trump had to have been thrilled to the shooter, Says Charlie Kirk, head of the pro-Trump youth group Turning Point USA. "It represents Biden being enemy power."

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Vance's penchant for provocation has often obscured the art of ideas he's seeking to advance. The Ohio Senator has positioned himself at the vanguard of an emerging ideology often described as the "New Right" or "National Conservatism" that rejects the economic consensus of globalization and inequality. Vance says that decades of unfettered trade, increased immigration, and market consolidation have led to a loss of jobs and opportunity, the disorganization of families, and widening regional inequality, ceding too much cultural power in the hands of liberal elites and too much economic power in the hands of corporations. Vance's proposed remedies are a mix of tariffs, higher taxes for Republicans, rebates meant to ease over-heated rents or cultural issues is in tension with an economic agenda that has benefited the wealthy over the working class.

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The Republican ticket at a campaign rally in Grand Rapids, Mich., on July 20. Rick Bowmer—AP

During the final stretch of the campaign, Vance's ideas and political instincts often will be turned on he attempts to play the dual role of Trump's half and aging. In the vice presidential debate Oct. 1 with Harris' running mate, Minnesota Governor Tim Walz, Vance's ideas and political instincts Democrats without alienating either voting voters or his base. In defiance of fellow travelers, the target took is to rein the battle of ideas and oversee the Democrats, who have ceded ground to Trump. "Tim Walz is the e-bag debate," Vance tells me. "It's not going to happen overnight."

A few months into Trump's first term, in November 2017, Vance gave an address at Oberlin College in Ohio, one of the most liberal campuses in America. In an audacious filled with the super-hero of literature professors and students, Vance argued that the Democratic Party had ceded its ideas collar America Most people leaving churches, jobs shifting statuses, community structures collapsing. Many felt they no longer had a place in the world. Vance, the author of Hillbilly Elegy, was considered a rising star in Trump's Republican Party. Trump's Democratic competitors underestimated a Hillbilly Elegy, a public intellectual who could demystify the phenomenon for consumption audiences. "He became this kind of guru who would come and tell you from behind the Dare what the enemy is thinking," says PhD candidate Ahmari of the contemporary think tank Open Markets, who attended the speech.

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Against Trump, say Vance's hard-line social views are deeply unpopular with most voters in her focus groups. She is also skeptical that Vance's MAGA pivot is fully genuine. "I think he has something in mind right now that he views as an ideological lodestar," she says. "I wouldn't say that I think he's got a core that's driven by something other than the pursuit of power. He figures out who the richest or most powerful alpha in a room is, and then he sucks up to them and adopts their project. It's what he did with Thiel. It's what he did with Tucker. It's what he did with Trump."

On his plane plastered with Trumpian epigrams, Vance makes the case for Trump's second-term vision of enhanced executive power. After Trump said he wanted to have a say over the Federal Reserve—eroding a division of power that prevents Presidents with political motives from determining monetary policy—Vance endorsed the idea. "In a democracy, you should ask yourself why it's not ideal for the political leadership to have control over most of the questions in the country," he tells me. When I ask whether that means Harris should gain the same powers as President, he takes issue with the question, before conceding that, according to his own argument, the answer has to be yes. "I think it would be a disaster," Vance adds.

As the jet makes its final descent into Tennessee, an aide tells me I have to return to my seat in the back. Before I do, I ask Vance whether he thinks that Trumpism, as a set of ideas, will outlast Trump himself. Vance recognizes the verdict is still out. "I'm going to try to make sure that happens," Vance says. "But a lot depends on this election, and a lot depends on how our party - responds to it."— *With reporting by Brian Bennett*

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