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Backed by Billionaires: Is JD Vance the Future of Trumpism?

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As the 2024 United States presidential race unfolds, an unprecedented scenario has emerged. At 78 years old, Donald Trump has become the oldest major-party presidential nominee in history, following President Joe Biden's withdrawal from the race. This development has significant implications for Trump's pick for vice president, JD Vance and, potentially, the future of the Republican Party, US politics, and the superpower's global attitude.

Trump's advanced age and ongoing legal challenges introduce an element of uncertainty to his potential presidency. There's a non-trivial possibility that, if elected, Trump might need to be replaced during his term due to health concerns or legal complications. Furthermore, regardless of the 2024 outcome, Trump will be ineligible for the 2028 election due to term limits.

These factors considerably elevate JD Vance's prospects within the Republican Party. As a rising star and Trump's running mate, Vance is well-positioned to potentially step into a leadership role, either midway through a Trump presidency (should the need arise) or as a presidential candidate in 2028. His journey from critic to supporter of Trump's policies has aligned him closely with the current direction of the GOP, making him a plausible successor to Trump's political legacy. Indeed, Trump appears to have picked a VP running partner who more or less is identical in outlook to the former president himself, as if here were anointing his own successor to cement his legacy?

Vance is no less jingoistic than Trump. His aversions to freeriding allies, and reluctance to send US military for armed interventions comes out clearly in the article he penned earlier this year for the *Financial Times* where he urges the US to ask "if our European allies can't even defend themselves, are they allies, or clients?"¹

Those views echo those of Donald Trump himself: are they not the views of someone who views US power as an asset to be husbanded jealously? Republicans closest to Vance, the 'Asia First' crowd, which long frowned upon too great an interest in European affairs, regard each cheque for Ukraine as a waste of scarce resources that should be conserved for the larger menace of China².

There is a strategy here of course, of helping to drive apart Russia and China by 'appeasing' Russia and pressuring China. Yet, to critics, it would appear superficial because it fails to recognise that a show of strength in one place can pay off elsewhere (would US stature in Asia go up or down if it let Ukraine fall?). It also exudes pessimism about US power. Yet, the alternative, as pursued by President Biden, is fraught with danger and sharpening global geopolitical divisions and rivalries. The Biden administration is simultaneously pressuring Russia and China, while also backing Israel's devastating genocidal war in Gaza. Whoever wins in November, the fact remains that there is bipartisan agreement over Israel and China, and a debate that might impact the US role regarding Ukraine, so a radical policy shift is not expected despite what the rhetoric suggests.

1 JD Vance, "JD Vance -Europe must stand on its own two feet on defence," *The Financial Times*, 19/2/2024, accessed on 12/8/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/ff9e3>

2 Bryan R Reckard, "Review of 'Asia First: China and the Making of Modern American Conservatism by Joyce Mao,'" *Journal of Cold War Studies* vol. 19, no.4 (2017), p: 245–247, at <https://n9.cl/gg8rd>



In contrast, on the Democratic side, Minnesota Governor Tim Walz despite his current popularity, is less likely to replace Vice President Kamala Harris either during a potential term or in the 2028 race. This disparity in succession probabilities between the two parties adds another layer of complexity to the political calculus. Moreover, Vance's rise comes at a time of deep political polarization or, rather factionalization.³ As the 2024 election approaches, the contrast between Vance's brand of cultural far right conservatism and the slightly progressive policies represented by figures like Minnesota Governor Tim Walz represents the rather poor choices facing US voters. As the political landscape continues to evolve, Vance's role as both a product and a shaper of contemporary conservatism takes on added significance.

From Hillbilly to Silicon Valley

Given these dynamics, understanding JD Vance – his background, ideological evolution, and political positioning – becomes crucial for grasping the potential trajectory of the Republican Party and, by extension, the future of US politics. Vance's story, with its themes of reinvention, class mobility, and ideological transformation, may well serve as a blueprint for the GOP's strategy in navigating the post-Trump era.

Vance embodies the nation's complex social and ideological tectonic plates and tensions. From his humble beginnings in a struggling Ohio town to his current position as running mate of Donald Trump and prominent voice in conservative circles, Vance's journey illuminates the country's deepening divides and the personal struggles behind political transformations.

Born into poverty and raised primarily by his grandmother due to his mother's struggle with addiction, Vance's early life was marked by the hardships typical of many in the US rust belt. Yet, driven by an innate ambition and the stable foundation provided by his grandmother's care, Vance managed to transcend his circumstances. His path led him from the Marine Corps to the hallowed halls of Yale Law School, a journey he chronicled in his bestselling memoir "Hillbilly Elegy."⁴

Vance's personal growth has been matched by an apparently profound spiritual and ideological evolution. Raised with his grandmother's simple, personal brand of Christianity, he briefly embraced atheism during his university years before ultimately converting to Catholicism. This spiritual journey paralleled his political transformation, shifting from libertarianism to cultural conservatism.⁵

Vance's embrace of Catholicism was not without inner conflict. He grappled with feelings of betrayal – both of his grandmother's teachings and of his own past self. Yet, he found in Catholicism a sense of historical continuity and tradition that resonated with his evolving worldview. In 2022, Vance

³ *ibid.*

⁴ JD Vance, *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis* (HarperCollins: New York, 2016).

⁵ JD Vance: "How I joined the Resistance," *The Lamp*, 1/4/2020, accessed on 23/9/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/1eycx1>



said that national abortion national ban was necessary to stop women from traveling across states to obtain an abortion, a stark contrast to comments he made during this election campaign week agreeing with Trump's view that abortion should be a state issue.⁶

Vance's political career has been meteoric and controversial. Once critical of Donald Trump, he later aligned himself with the former president's brand of right-wing nationalism. He was never optimistic about Trump having a viable solution to "flip the trade switch and make all these steel jobs come back to Middletown." During Trump's first presidency he remained sceptical about his ability to turn things around and mitigate the job problems. But his party loyalties allowed him to give space and time to President Trump to prove himself.⁷

To supporters, he represents a voice for the "forgotten" White working class. To critics, his transformation smacks of opportunism and a betrayal of his roots. Vance's story is rife with contradictions that mirror the United States' own struggles. He is at once a product of Appalachia and the Ivy League, a critic of elites who has joined their ranks, a champion of traditional values who has undergone radical personal change.

Silicon Valley Connections: The Tech-Populist Paradox

Vance straddles the worlds of Silicon Valley elitism and Rust Belt populism. He leverages his tech industry experience and connections while maintaining his image as an advocate for working-class Americans. However, there is an inconsistency in Vance's populist messaging and his elite connections. In the broader context of Vance's potential future leadership role in the Republican Party, these tech industry ties could prove both an asset and a liability. They provide him with resources and a powerful network but also complicate his narrative as an outsider challenging the establishment.⁸

Moreover, one cannot overlook the fact that Silicon Valley is endeavouring to considerably reduce, even eliminate the role of manual labour in factories with artificial intelligence and robots. This makes it difficult to understand how the reindustrialization programme that Vance promises for the White working classes is going to ameliorate their condition.

Vance: Billions Stand Behind Me

In addition, and equally significantly, the likes of Vance sponsor Peter Thiel, the tech billionaire who pumped \$15 million into Vance's Ohio senatorial election campaign, dismiss the connection

⁶ Andrew Kaczynski, & Em Steck: "JD Vance said in 2022 he 'would like abortion to be illegal nationally,'" *CNN*, 17/7/24, accessed on 23/9/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/4qxmuk>

⁷ James Hofmann, "Why the author of 'Hillbilly Elegy' is moving home to Ohio," *The Washington Post*, 21/12/2016, accessed on 23/9/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/87ulb>

⁸ Ryan Mac & Theodore Schleifer, "How a Network of Tech Billionaires Helped J.D. Vance Leap into Power," *The New York Times*, 17/7/ 2024, accessed on 23/9/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/q9ez1>



between freedom and democracy. Thiel has argued that freedom and democracy are now no longer "compatible" – and he's probably right because of his narrow construction of the meaning of "freedom". For Thiel, Musk and the mega-billionaires, freedom is the right to accumulate vast wealth off the backs of non-unionised workers, unregulated by the state, and untaxed by the IRS. Thiel noted, "The 1920s were the last decade in American history during which one could be genuinely optimistic about politics. Since 1920, the vast increase in welfare beneficiaries and the extension of the franchise to women – two constituencies that are notoriously tough for libertarians – have rendered the notion of 'capitalist democracy' into an oxymoron." This cabal of billionaires includes David Sacks, Rupert Murdoch, Jamie Dimon, and Stephen A. Schwarzman. 9

The 1920s followed the 'Red Scare' of 1919-21 – when the state and big business launched a war on organised labour, socialist and communist parties, and immigrants in the wake of the Bolshevik revolution's global reverberations. It was followed by the Wall St crash, the great depression, the rise of the fascist and Nazi parties, and the Second World War.

Given the fascist insurrection and coup attempt of 6 January 2021, the abandonment of democracy and constitutional norms by the billionaire backers of Trump and Vance further fuels the drive towards fascism in the US ruling elite.

Understanding this aspect of Vance's career, funders and connections are crucial for grasping the full picture of his political identity and the forces shaping his ascent in US politics. As the GOP navigates its post-Trump future, figures like Vance – with their ability to connect disparate worlds – may play a pivotal role in defining the party's direction and appeal.

Thiel's talk of the failures of elite institutions and belief in Christianity made Vance reconsider his own faith and immediately make plans for a career outside of law – one that wound through the worlds of tech and venture capital before politics. In the years following his graduation from Yale, he developed extensive ties with Silicon Valley investors and elites. His time as a venture capitalist, coupled with his status as a 'rags-to-riches' media fixture, helped him make connections central to his political rise, as well as garner him influential supporters that pushed Trump to make him his vice-presidential pick. After *Hillbilly Elegy* became a bestseller in 2016 and brought him to national prominence, Vance joined the venture capital firm Revolution, founded by the former AOL CEO Steve Case. Yet, *Hillbilly Elegy* itself, while documenting aspects of social deprivation in the rust belt is, like *Dreams from My Father*, and Obama's election victory speech in 2008, a clarion call to self-help and self-improvement as the only way to make it in America.

Interestingly, Vance pitches for a strong coercive state but champions cryptocurrency as an alternative to mainstream finance."¹⁰ This is not surprising as Vance personally has large investments in crypto, and more and more of the truly massive wealth of the already-rich and powerful is tied up with

9 Robert Reich, "Elon Musk and Peter Thiel's War on Democracy," *Truth Dig*, 28/5/24, accessed on 23/9/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/ynhjf>

10 Nikou Asgari: "A major ad-Vance for crypto," *The Financial Times*, 19/7/2024, accessed on 23/9/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/vo6n1>



crypto-currencies.¹¹ Tump has promised to deregulate crypto, while the Biden administration has been far more strict in its regulation of the currency.¹²

Conclusion

Whether one views Vance as an unlikely voice for the voiceless, a symbol of ideological opportunism, or the frontman for far right and fascistic politics in the United States, his journey from "hillbilly" to political powerbroker offers vital insights into the forces moulding US society this century. As the nation grapples with deepening divides, Vance's story serves as a compelling, if contentious, case study in the possibilities and pitfalls of personal and political transformation.

As we look toward the future of US politics, Vance stands out as a figure of particular interest and importance. His personal journey, political evolution, and potential for leadership offer a unique lens through which to view the changing face of the Republican Party and the broader shifts in US politics and society.

11 Tyler Walicek: "Why Are More Tech Leaders Pivoting to Trump? Follow the Crypto," *Truth Out*, 28/5/24, accessed on 23/9/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/okx7f>

12 Nikou Asgari: "A major ad-Vance for crypto,".