



Republican vice presidential candidate Ohio Sen. J.D. Vance speaks during the Republican National Convention July 17 in Milwaukee. If he and Donald Trump win the election, Vance would become the country's second Catholic vice president. Joe Biden was the first. (AP/Jae C. Hong)



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July 18, 2024

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J.D. Vance has taken on one of the most unenviable tasks imaginable: playing No. 2 to Donald Trump. He needs to attack when told to attack, but he can't risk outshining his boss. Trump, like the Sun King at Versailles, is not looking for any competing stars, only satellites that rotate in orbit around himself. In 2016, Trump chose Mike Pence to shore up his standing with the evangelical base, but Pence had the added benefit of being painfully dull. [Vance](#), the wunderkind who delivered his speech as the GOP vice presidential candidate at the party's convention July 17, doesn't appear to be someone cut out for playing second fiddle. There will be friction in that relationship, and soon.

The two men certainly share an ability to sniff out opportunity and seize it. Both men are in on the con. At The New Republic, Greg Sargeant [discussed](#) Vance with Sarah Longwell, a Never Trumper pollster, and they focused on something Vance said in 2016: "I can't stomach Trump. I think that he's noxious and he is leading the white, working class to a really dark place." He knew what he would be getting into. Longwell noted that the quote illustrated the fact that Vance is a "hollow person of little conviction who decided if you can't beat 'em, join 'em."

The problem is not that this is hypocritical. Many veep choices have to explain the negative things they once voiced against the person at the top of the ticket. The problem is that it shows Vance knows Trump's working-class pitch is fraudulent and he appears fine with that fact. Seeing as he has been recruited to [help win](#) the Great Lakes swing states — Michigan, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin — by appealing to those same working-class voters, it remains to be seen if he can sustain the con for four long months.

The biggest contrast Vance presented was not with the Democrats. It was with the Republicans of yesteryear.

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Vance is not a deep thinker. He wrote an [essay](#) about his conversion to Catholicism for The Lamp in 2020, strangely titled "How I Joined the Resistance: On Mamaw and becoming Catholic." How typical of a kind of conservative Catholic to see in the church an effective defensive posture? He seems unaware that the church exists to save not to resist but to save, that "catholic" is a word with a meaning and it is the opposite of any sectarian, anti-liberal agenda. Vance's essay jumps from his grandmother (Mamaw) to Peter Thiel to his love for his wife to his commitment to Ayn Rand to his introduction to Catholicism. You expect the word "tilt" to splash across the screen as you read it. He starts by explaining he and Mamaw argued "constantly," but a few paragraphs later, we learn that "Mamaw seemed not to care much about Catholics." Then what were the arguments about?

Vance's account is all very heady, very intellectual. Augustine's [Confessions](#) or Newman's [Apologia pro Vita Sua](#) or Brunetière's ["Après une visite au Vatican"](#) all show brilliant minds falling in love with the Lord and his church. If there was much love in Vance's conversion story, he didn't share it with the rest of us. An understanding of Catholicism as primarily about the arrangement of ideas is an impoverished understanding of Catholicism. It is only superficially intellectual.

Vance's convention speech reflected all these qualities. "Tonight is a night of hope," he began, but most of his speech rehearsed the dystopian version of America that bears little resemblance to reality. He is too smart to dismiss the threat of climate change, but he complained about President Biden's efforts to protect the environment as the "Green New Scam." He eloquently spoke about the attempt on Trump's life but then he celebrated the 19 loaded handguns his Mamaw had stashed around her house when she died.

The indictment of "the corrupt Washington insiders" was not limited to the Bidens. Although he did not mention George W. Bush by name, his criticism of the Iraq War was explicit. Although he did not mention Ronald Reagan by name, he criticized the neoliberal economic policies Reagan began. He criticized Biden for supporting NAFTA, a "bad trade deal that sent countless good jobs to Mexico." As Jon King noted on CNN, NAFTA passed with Republican votes. But that was yesterday's GOP. The biggest contrast Vance presented was not with the Democrats. It was with the Republicans of yesteryear.

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Vance's extended reflection on the cemetery plot he owns in eastern Kentucky and his hope to be buried there someday was strange. He was striving to be, dare we say it, elegiac. It came out thin, lacking in depth, ridden with clichés.

Overall, the speech was somewhat flat. Vance's only real applause lines came when he criticized Biden or the Chinese Communist Party. The room stood when he gave a shoutout to his mom and the fact she is celebrating 10 years of sobriety. He spoke about the "forgotten working class," but there was no empathy in his voice, no depth of understanding in his words. It is politics, and we expect clichés, but the guy is an author. He is supposed to be brilliant. The speech was not brilliant.

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There was absolutely nothing in the speech that struck me as uniquely a consequence of his [conversion](#) to Catholicism. To be sure, being a politician is a different vocation from being a pastor or a theologian. Politics demands compromise. Biden compromises the faith by his indifference to the human dignity of the unborn while Vance compromises the faith by his indifference to the human dignity of migrants. Ours is a pluralistic society in which we Catholics must convince, not coerce, our fellow citizens of the rightness of our moral vision and its applicability to our laws. Vance seems all too willing to skip the convincing part and jump to the coercion.

That is what is most scary about Vance and Trump: It isn't clear how much of the strongman attitude is so much posing for the cameras and how much of it is a governing agenda. Scarier still, it isn't clear if they can tell the difference. Do they still remember that they are perpetrating a con on the American people? Or have they started believing their own propaganda? Listening to Vance, it wasn't clear which option was real to him. Neither option is reassuring.

This story appears in the **Election 2024** feature series. [View the full series.](#)