JD Vance was once 'never Trump'. Now he's his running mate

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Mike Wendling
BBC News

Reporting from the Republican National Convention in Milwaukee, Wisconsin

Reuters

"I'm a 'never Trump' guy. I never liked him."

"My god what an idiot."

"I find him reprehensible."

That was from JD Vance in interviews and on Twitter in 2016, when the publication of his memoir Hillbilly Elegy catapulted him to fame.

In the same year, he wrote privately on Facebook to Josh McLaurin, his former law school roommate, now a state Senator in Georgia: "I go back and forth between thinking Trump is a cynical asshole... or that he's America's Hitler".

'To go from those texts... to being Trump's biggest cheerleader, it's just kind of unbelievable," McLaurin, who is a member of the Democratic Party, told BBC Newshour.

In just a few years later, Vance has transformed himself from "never Trump" into one of the former president's most steadfast allies.

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The 40-year-old first-term senator from Ohio is now by Trump's side as vice-presidential running mate – and, by extension, an early frontrunner for the Republican presidential nomination in 2028 – with a reliably conservative voting record, relative youth and Midwestern roots that Republicans hope will boost support at the ballot box.

On the campaign trail he has established himself as an "attack dog" relentlessly criticising the opposition - a role traditionally filled by a running mate, albeit one that seems less crucial given Trump's own rhetoric.

Vance regularly ventures onto cable TV shows and takes questions from reporters at rallies, often drawing a contrast with the more cautious media strategy of the Harris campaign.

But his hardline views on women and immigrants have attracted controversy.

Since being picked by Trump, he's doubled down on false rumours about Haitian immigrants in Springfield, Ohio. Remarks from past interviews and speeches have resurfaced, including Vance supporting a nationwide ban on abortion and calling the UK an "Islamist country".

He has been forced to defend a remark he made on Fox News three years ago about "a bunch of childless cat ladies", including Vice-President Harris.

And he has put the blame for two assassination attempts squarely on rhetoric from top Democrats, ignoring any suggestion from critics that Trump's past statements have also inspired violence - for instance the January 2021 riot at the US Capitol.

Polls indicate that the controversies have helped make Vance one of the least-popular vice-presidential nominees of recent times. They've also distracted from his populist message on the economy, an issue that the Trump campaign sees as a strength.

McLaurin said that his former roommate previously felt like the Republican party needed to give working people hope as well as economic opportunities. If unsuccessful in doing so, Vance believed a "demagogue" would fill that vacancy, he said.

According to McLaurin, Mr Vance saw Trump as the demagogue - but clearly changed his mind.

In fact, Vance has made something of a habit of transformation. How did he emerge from a tough upbringing to reach the highest levels of American politics?

Mr Vance speaking at the conservative Turning Point conference in Detroit in June

Memoir makes him famous

Vance was born James Donald Bowman in Middletown, Ohio, to a mother who struggled with addiction and a father who left the family when JD was a toddler.

He was raised by his grandparents, “Mamaw” and “Papaw”, whom he sympathetically portrayed in his 2016 memoir.

A revolving cast of father figures - he changed his surname several times - and his mother's substance abuse issues resulted in a chaotic childhood, and he regularly found refuge in Mamaw's house.

When he married, both JD and his wife Usha took the last name of Vance to honour his maternal grandparents' family name - leading to his current name: James David Vance.

Middletown is located in rust-belt Ohio, but Vance identified closely with his extended family’s roots to the south in Appalachia, the vast mountainous inland region that stretches from the Deep South to the fringes of the industrial Midwest and north-east. Largely but not exclusively white, it includes some of the country’s poorest areas.

In Hillbilly Elegy, Vance painted a personal portrait of the trials, travails and bad decisions of family members, neighbours and friends. While criticising outsiders for looking down on Appalachia's hillbillies, he took a decidedly conservative view, describing his people as chronic spendthrifts, dependent on government welfare payments and mostly failing to work hard and pull themselves up by their bootstraps.

He wrote that he saw Appalachians “reacting to bad circumstances in the worst way possible” and that they were products of “a culture that encourages social decay instead of counteracting it”.

“The truth is hard,” he wrote, “and the hardest truths for hill people are the ones they must tell about themselves.”

By the time the book came out, Vance’s own bootstrap-tugging had slung him far away from Middletown: first to the US Marines and a tour of duty in Iraq, and later to Ohio State University, Yale Law School and a job as a venture capitalist in California.

Hillbilly Elegy not only made him into a bestselling author, but a sought-after commentator who was frequently called upon to explain Donald Trump’s appeal to white, working-class voters.

He rarely missed an opportunity to criticise the then-Republican nominee.

“I think this election is really having a negative effect especially on the white working class," he told an interviewer in October 2016.

"What it’s doing is giving people an excuse to point the finger at someone else, point the finger at Mexican immigrants, or Chinese trade or the Democratic elites or whatever else.”

But ironically, those are some of the finger-pointing themes that he has regularly raised as part of the Trump campaign.

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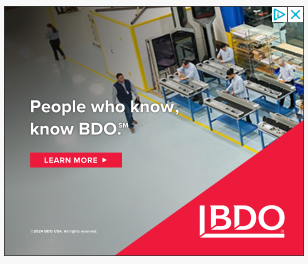
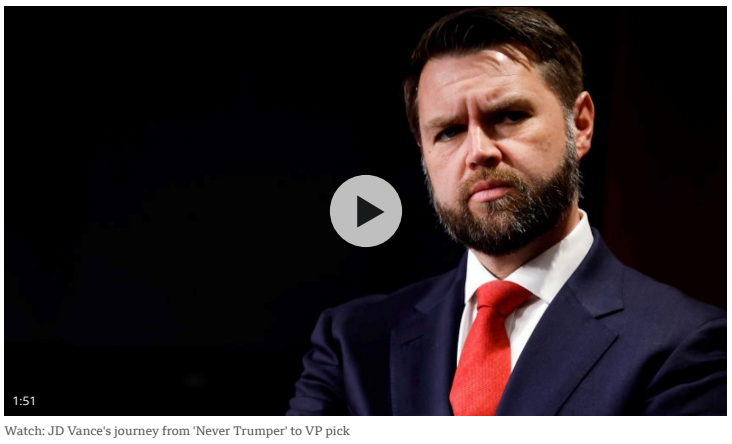




Watch: JD Vance's journey from 'Never Trumper' to VP pick

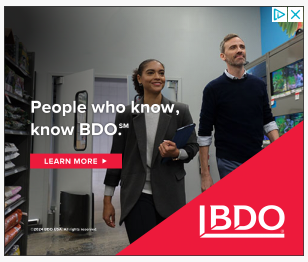
From venture capital to politics

In 2017 Vance returned to Ohio and continued to work in venture capital. He and his wife Usha, whom he met at Yale, have three children - Ewan, Vivek and Mirabel.

As the child of Indian immigrants who grew up in San Diego, Usha Vance has a very different background from her husband. The daughter of academics, she also attended Yale as an undergraduate and received a masters degree from University of Cambridge.

She served as a clerk to Supreme Court Chief Justice John Roberts and most recently worked for Munger, Tolles & Olson, a firm that a leading legal journal described as "progressive" and "woke". Mrs Vance resigned shortly after her husband was selected by Trump.

Meanwhile, Mr Vance had long been whispered about as a political candidate, and he saw an opportunity when Ohio’s Republican senator Rob Portman decided not to run for re-election in 2022.



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Although his campaign was initially slow to get going, he got a kick-start via a $10m (£7.7m) donation by his former boss, Silicon Valley power broker Peter Thiel.

His rhetoric shifted, and he spent less time talking about the failures of hillbillies and more about elites and Democrats. He began appearing on Fox News but also on fringier political outlets. Many of the controversial clips resurfacing now date from around the time his Senate campaign was starting to gain traction.

But the real hurdle stopping him from getting elected in increasingly Republican Ohio was his past criticism of Trump.

He apologised for his previous remarks and earned Trump's endorsement, pushing him to the top of the Republican field and eventually into the Senate.

In the process, Vance became an important player in the world of Make America Great Again politics – and signed up almost completely to Trump's agenda.

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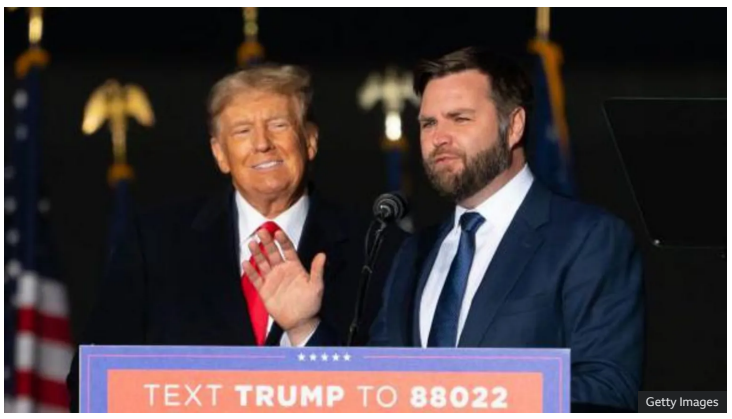

Trump's endorsement was crucial during Mr Vance's 2022 Senate campaign

Where does he stand on the issues?

In the Senate he has been a reliable conservative vote, backing populist economic policies and emerging as one of the biggest congressional sceptics of aid to Ukraine.

Given his short tenure in the Democrat-led chamber, the bills he has sponsored have rarely moved forward, and have more often been about sending messages than changing policy.

In recent months, Mr Vance introduced bills to withhold federal funds for colleges where there are encampments or protests against Israel's war in Gaza, and to colleges that employ undocumented immigrants.

Mr Vance also sponsored legislation in March that would cut the Chinese government off from US capital markets if it does not follow international trade law.

He hit all of these themes at a speech in July at the National Conservatism Conference, saying: "The real threat to American democracy is that American voters keep on voting for less immigration and our politicians keep on rewarding us with more."

He said the idea of the American Dream – "This very basic idea that you should be able to build a good life for yourself and your family in the country you call home" - was "under siege by the left".

And he said that American involvement in Ukraine had "no obvious conclusion or even objective that we're close to getting accomplished".

At the same conference, he said the UK was "not doing so good" because of immigration and claimed that under a Labour government, the country had become the "first truly Islamist country" with a nuclear bomb.

He received a rapturous welcome when he entered the Republican National Convention in Milwaukee in July, shortly after his selection was announced.

"He's from humble beginnings and he's young," said Amanda Suffecool, the party's chair in Portage County, in north-east Ohio. "A lot of people are going to think he looks like him."

But since then, the headlines have more often focused on his controversies than his folksy appeal.

What did he say on the campaign trail?

His comments about Haitian immigrants eating pets, based on unsubstantiated internet rumours, were repeated by Trump during the presidential debate earlier this month and **caused huge upheaval in Springfield**, a city not far from Vance's hometown in Ohio.

During a CNN interview Vance said he felt the need to "create stories so that the... media actually pays attention to the suffering of the American people".

But he also insisted that constituents have told him stories of pet-eating by immigrants, even though his Senate office has not responded to requests for further details.

He has similarly vacillated on the issue of abortion.

Vance, who was baptised as a Catholic in 2019, has expressed support in the past for a nationwide abortion ban after 15 weeks of pregnancy.

But he recently backed Trump's view that the matter was for states to decide.

Yet when he went further and said that Trump would veto a nationwide abortion ban if Congress were to pass one, he earned a rebuke from his boss.

"I didn't discuss it with JD, in all fairness," Trump said during the presidential debate. "And I don't mind if he has a certain view, but I don't think he was speaking for me."

Vance has also been out front in the drive to blame Democrats for two assassination attempts against Trump.

He was one of the first top Republicans to latch on to this theme after the first attempt in July, and wrote a long post on X after the second incident

He tweeted: "The rhetoric is out of control" and painted Republicans as victims of both censorship and violence.

His critics, however, point to the dozens of bomb threats against schools in Springfield and a long list going back years of inflammatory posts and comments by Trump and his allies - and ask who's really stoking America's political violence.

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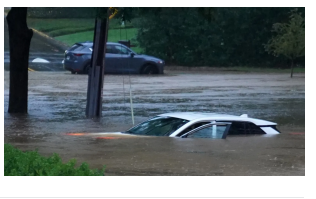

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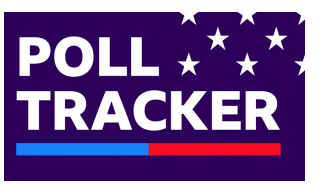

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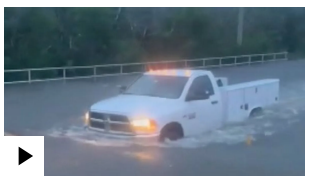

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