Tuesday, July 16, 2024 / VP JD

[HALF SECOND OF SILENCE]

[BILLBOARD]

*<NATSOUND> REPUBLICAN NATIONAL CONVENTION*

NOEL KING (host): Donald Trump opened the Republican National Convention in Milwaukee last night…

*<CLIP> SINGER LEE GREENWOOD: He’s here tonight to show his courage, his defiance against somebody who tried to kill him … <fade>*

NOEL: He appeared, left ear wrapped in gauze, alongside his newly chosen running mate…

*<CLIP> CROWD: JD! JD! JD! JD! JD!*

NOEL: JD Vance, the 39-year-old Senator from Ohio, who is as famous for his critiques of Trump…

*<CLIP> SEN JD VANCE (R-OH): I’m a Never Trump guy. I never liked him.*

NOEL: … as he is for having a movie made about his life and his mamaw.

*<CLIP> “HILLBILLY ELEGY”, GLENN CLOSE: You want to be somebody? Or not?*

SCORING <Amethyst – BMC>

NOEL: But these two guys have warmed to each other. Because Vance, we’re told, has VISION. What’s that vision look like? Coming up on *Today, Explained.*

**[THEME]**

*<CLIP> “24” THEME, AMANDA’S DAD: Explained. 2024, Explained.*

NOEL: Minutes after Donald Trump announced his running mate yesterday, *Politico* published “55 Things to Know about JD Vance.” by Ian Ward. Ian spent hours interviewing Vance for a profile titled “Is There Something More Radical Than MAGA? JD Vance is Dreaming It.” I asked Ian to start with Vance’s Linkedin.

IAN WARD (*Politico* reporter): Yeah, he was a Yale Law School graduate, a marine veteran. He served briefly in Iraq as a public affairs officer. He was encouraged to write that memoir, “Hillbilly Elegy,” by his law school mentor. And the book came out in 2016 and immediately became a sensation that hit the New York Times bestseller list, and it got taken up as a sort of Rosetta Stone for liberals who are trying to understand the disaffection of middle American, blue collar workers.

*<CLIP> NPR, VANCE: Donald Trump, if nothing else, is relatable to the average working-class American because he speaks off the cuff. He's clearly unfiltered and unrehearsed and there is something relatable about that, even if, you know, half of the things that he says don't make any sense or a quarter of the things that he says are offensive… <fade down>*

IAN: And he became a sort of national celebrity very quickly for this book. You know, went on all the talk shows…

*<CLIP> HOST MEGYN KELLY: Have you been surprised by how successful it's been?   
VANCE: Yes. <laughs> How could I not be? I’m sitting here talking to Megyn Kelly … <fade>*

IAN: It was a memoir, so it told his life story. The political kernel of the book was basically that Appalachian Americans and a certain type of blue collar worker suffered from a set of social pathologies, like, you know, typical tropes, sort of laziness, a lack of personal initiative. That was the real root cause of a lot of their suffering, and that the responsibility for rectifying the situation of Middle American workers rested with the workers themselves and the people in Appalachia that that government programs, and social safety nets were not the way to lift these people out of poverty and deprivation. That they had to sort of bootstraps themselves up. So a very sort of typical old school conservative message.

*<CLIP> “HILLBILLY ELEGY”, MAMAW: You gotta take care of business, you gotta go to school, you gotta get good grades to even have a chance.   
YOUNG JD: Mom was the best in her class. What’s the point?   
MAMAW: I’m talking about a chance. You might not make it, but you sure as hell won’t if you don’t try.   
<fade down on:> JD: Why do you even care what I do?*

NOEL: And so the, the news reporters are calling this guy and they're saying, we want to understand why white people voted for Donald Trump. And JD Vance is there to explain. At the time, what does he think about them?

IAN: Yeah, he did not like Donald Trump. He famously in an essay for The Atlantic called Donald Trump “cultural heroin.” This was in the middle of the opioid epidemic. And he said Trump offered the sort of blissful ignorance and short term gratification. That heroin was providing to these middle-american communities. He also famously, in a text message, speculated that Trump could become, quote, “America's Hitler.” That wasn’t a public message. That was a message to a friend that later became public. But he expressed some really sincere concerns about Trump and what Trump was offering, the type of people he had written about in his book.

NOEL: Donald Trump famously prefers people who don't call him an idiot or compare him to Hitler. What happened to Vance in the, in the eight years since then?

IAN: Vance reemerged on the national political scene in 2021 when he ran for the United States Senate in Ohio.

*<CLIP> POLITICAL AD, VANCE: Are YOU a racist? Do YOU hate Mexicans? The media calls us racists for wanting to build Trump’s wall… <fade under>*

IAN: By that point, he had become a Trump acolyte and a Trump supporter.

*<CLIP> FOX NEWS, VANCE: Like a lot of people, I criticized Trump back in 2016. And I ask folks not to judge me based on what I said in 2016, because I’ve been very open that I did say those critical things and I regret them, and I regret being wrong about the guy. <fade under>*

IAN: His explanation for this transformation is twofold. One, he says he came to see over Trump's first term that Trump was actually right on some of the policy positions that he cared about, most notably trade, immigration, economics and cultural issues. The flip side is that he says he was sort of radicalized by the liberal reaction to Trump. You know, he had fallen in these very elite liberal circles at that point. And he says, as he watched his liberal friends react to Trump and sort of go a little bit crazy as he sees it, over what Trump was doing, it radicalized him, against the sort of vision of progressive liberalism that was dominant in those circles. There's a term in right-wing online discourse called “red-pillling,” which is a meme sort of taken from the Matrix movie.

NOEL: [chuckles]

*<CLIP> “THE MATRIX”: You take the blue pill; the story ends. You wake up in your bed and believe whatever you want to believe. You take the red pill; you stay in Wonderland and I show you how deep the rabbit hole goes…*

IAN: And this is a term that a lot of right wingers used to describe their own radicalization. And and Vance has described his own political journey in those terms that somewhere between 2016 and 2021, he kind of took the red pill, and came to this sort of more radical vision of American politics.

*<CLIP> JACK MURPHY LIVE PODCAST, VANCE: I saw and realized something about the American elite, and about my role in the American elite, that just took me a little while to figure out. Right. And I, I, I, I was red-pilled… <under>*

NOEL: So people might say, like, JD Vance is a flip flopper, but JD Vance is going to say, no, I just – I just woke up.

IAN: Yeah, and, you know, there's a compelling argument to be made that there is a pretty strong degree of continuity between the political vision that he laid out in “Hillbilly Elegy” and the political vision he continues to espouse. I mean, it's changed in substantive ways. And most notably, he's taken up what could be called sort of systemic critiques of American political economy. You know, whereas his book relied very heavily on sort of individual critiques, and personal moral critiques, he's taken up structural ones. And so he says, you know, ‘The way the American economy disadvantages these people at a sort of global and national level, it doesn't just boil down to individual responsibility, but there's a sort of conservative core to that vision that has remained unchanged.

NOEL: So several people campaigned very publicly to be Trump's vice president, Tim Scott, North Dakota's governor, Doug Burgum, Elise Stefanik, Kristi Noem (R.I.P. Cricket)...

IAN: <snorts>

NOEL: … Marco Rubio in Florida. Why did Donald Trump pick JD Vance, of all these people?

IAN: I think what we do know is that JD Vance is very, very close with Donald Trump Jr. Donald Trump Jr is a close personal friend of his. When I talked to Vance a couple of months ago, he said, they text on a daily basis. And we, we do know that Donald Trump Jr was lobbying very, very hard for his father to pick JD Vance.

*<CLIP> CBS NEWS: Explain to those watching why you think JD Vance is the best man to run with your father.   
DONALD TRUMP JR: Listen, I think he’s lived the epitome of the American Dream story. I think he’s the guy that’s capable of bringing that same success that he was able to have, coming from nothing, coming from Appalachia, and succeeding at a level that nobody could possibly fathom… <fade under>*

IAN: Also back in 2021 and 2022 when Vance was running for Senate, Donald Trump Jr lobbied very hard to sort of create the reproach between the two men. Their relationship had fallen out over some of Vance’s critical comments. And, Donald Trump Jr brought them back together with the help of Peter Thiel, of course, who's JD Vance's former boss and mentor.

*<CLIP> FORMER PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP: This is a great person who I’ve really gotten to know. Yeah, he said some bad things about me. But that was before he knew me, and then he fell in love. <crowd laughs>*

IAN: But that seems to have been one major factor. Another seems to be the political calculation, you know, picking out signals that Trump is taking this sort of new right, populist nationalist agenda very, very seriously in his second term. You know, he received a lot of criticism from some circles for not going far enough, in terms of implementing that agenda in his first term. And he seems to be signaling now that he's taking that seriously and that Vance will play a big part in enacting some of those policies.

NOEL: Unlike a lot of people who are talking about JD Vance right now, today, you actually spent considerable time with him for a big profile you did for *Politico Magazine*. What can you tell us definitively about who JD Vance is and what he wants?

IAN: There are a lot of Republican politicians in Washington who've taken up the Trumpian talking points and adopted the Trumpian rhetoric without thinking through a sort of comprehensive ideological or philosophical vision of what nationalist, populist conservatism would look like. And JD Vance is not one of those people.

SCORING <240626 by Patrick Boyd>

IAN: This dude is an intellectual of a sort, and he thinks of politics in intellectual terms. He has a pretty coherent worldview and political philosophy that justify and reinforce a lot of, of Trump's policies. But also, you know, at times go[es] even further than Trump, on some things. So, you know, he's flip flopped, but the vision he has now is pretty coherent and pretty sweeping, not always adhered to in political practice. But when you talk to him and have him explain why he's doing what he's doing, he can marshall up a whole host of arguments to explain the nationalist, populist project.

NOEL: Ian Ward, *Politico*, explains the nationalist populist project, coming up next.

[BREAK]

[BUMPER]

*<CLIP> “SAVE THE LAST DANCE FOR ME”, THE DRIFTERS: So darlin’, save the last–  
 VANCE: Vance.   
 THE DRIFTERS: – for me.*

NOEL: I’m Noel King, We’re back with Ian Ward who chronicled J.D. Vance for Politico Magazine. Ward and others identify Vance as a leading figure of the so-called NEW Right - and Ian says the Senator has some New Right plans for America,

IAN: JD Vance his vision has not always been articulated all that well publicly. But the vision he laid out to me and to other reporters has begun with a critique. It's a critique of what he calls sort of liberal progressivism. The New Right calls this sort of the regime or the cathedral at various points. But it's a vision fundamentally of progress. You know, the way that liberals think of progress in many respects is, you know, economic liberalization and technological innovation and the relaxing of, you know, what appear to be oppressive social norms, that's a vision of progress. J.D. Vance thinks that's exactly wrong. He thinks that those things have led to a kind of regression in American life.

SCORING <Vaquero>

*<CLIP> VANCE: I do not think that America’s greatest and most powerful economy was built by socialism, but I also don’t believe it was built by what folks often call neoliberalism, or classical liberalism, or whatever term you want to provide. // But I believe America’s wealth was built by an American system. By a recognition that we needed to build our own industries, protect our own technology and industries…. <fade down>*

IAN: He's grounded in a vision of populism that's very local, right? He says it's the vision of the country that he wants to see is a vision that would support the type of people he grew up with in Middletown, Ohio. He says he's seen that community hollowed out over the past 50 years by trade liberalization, which took jobs and manufacturing jobs overseas. The financialization of the economy, which benefited economic elites who own things like stocks and bonds and not working-class people who have a financial stake in the older industrial economies, and also the liberalization of social norms, which he thinks – rightly or wrongly – have negatively impacted working-class people.

*<CLIP> VANCE: And I worry a little bit that when people hear the phrase “the American Dream,” their eyes sort of glaze over. Because the way that it’s been taught to by so many establishment Republican politicians is that the American Dream is the dream of Mitt Romney. It’s private jets. It’s fancy businesses. It’s a lot of money. But that’s not the American Dream that most Americans actually occupy. They just want to live a good life in their own country.*

IAN: So what he wants to see is a return to the political economy and social economy that he believes will support those types of people. You know, that means protective trade measures to support American manufacturing jobs. That means a type of social welfare policy to support traditional families. That means a more aggressive posture towards China. You know, that's the vision of – he wouldn't call it progress, I don't think, because I think he is skeptical of the whole idea of progress – but that's the vision of the country he has laid out.

SCORING OUT

NOEL: Let me ask you for some clarification on two things. The first thing is you mentioned social norms. J.D. Vance, his belief that the liberalization of social norms has sent us down the wrong path. What are you talking about? What are we talking about when we talk about these, these so-called liberal social norms?

IAN: Yeah, I mean, it's pretty conventional Republican culture issues. He has taken up the issue of increased acceptance of transgender people, abortion, of course,

*<CLIP> WKYC: U.S. Senator JD Vance has introduced legislation that would federally ban gender affirming care for minors…”*

IAN: He is a recent Catholic convert. In fact, he converted to Catholicism in 2019 and has come out in favor of a 16-week abortion ban, much like Trump. He's moderated a bit on this issue in response to Trump's own moderation, but does believe in, in a 16 week federal ban. Another big hobbyhorse of his is the decline of the, the nuclear family. You know, he thinks that American economic policy has not been conducive to the formation of traditional nuclear families. You know, mother, father, 3 to 4 kids.

*<CLIP> VANCE: The fact that we’re not having enough babies, the fact that we’re not having enough children, is a crisis in this country. It’s a crisis because it makes our media more miserable. It’s a crisis because it doesn’t give our leaders enough of an investment in the future of their country. And it’s a crisis because we know that babies are good.*

IAN: He has advocated for what he calls family policy, which is a set of economic policies and social policies to promote family formation.

*<CLIP> VANCE: Why can’t we give resources to parents who tell us the only reason they aren’t having kids is they can’t afford it?*

IAN: Those are the kind of pillars of his, his social crusade. But he's also taken up things like mask mandates. He wants to ban mask mandates, DEI initiatives. He's introduced legislation to ban federal DEI initiatives. So traditional Republican culture war issues. Where he diverges a bit from traditional Republicans on cultural issues is that he sees them as the flip side of economic issues, often. So he has this slogan he uses often…

*<CLIP> VANCE: The culture war in this country is a class war.*

IAN: What he means by that is that he thinks that elite liberals have basically weaponized their own social norms as a means to reinforce their economic interests. One example he gives is hormones for transgender care. You know, he, he believes those are bad, not only because they are gender transition medicine, but because he believes big pharmaceutical corporations are, in effect, preying on vulnerable young people to pad their bottom lines by selling them expensive hormones. Right. So he frames some of these economic issues in cultural terms and terms – he frames cultural issues in economic terms. So that's where he's a bit different.

NOEL: Let me ask you to pull out one more thing. You mentioned social welfare for traditional families. I think people are going to hear that and they're gonna be like, ‘Mm, what does that look like?’ What does that look like?

IAN: Yeah, that is a good question. We don't know a ton about what that would look like. Many conservatives had actually been looking towards Viktor Orbán's government in Hungary as an example of, of pro-family policy. You know, it's tax subsidies for having children. It's making primary education and daycare less expensive and more affordable. It's sort of vaguely- articulated vision at this point, but it's basically welfare programs to promote having families, getting married, settling down, having that sort of white-picket-fence traditional American life.

NOEL: Hm. So you've mentioned this term a couple of times now, The New Right. Today, Explained did some reporting on the New Right movement two years ago.

CASSETTE SFX *<CLIP> TEX REWIND, NOEL: Coming up on Today, Explained: Is The New Right the future of conservatism? Or are they the other f-word?  
TEX CO-HOST SEAN RAMESWARAM (whispering): Fascists…*CASSETTE SFX

NOEL: How popular with ordinary Americans are these new right ideas like paying, paying parents for each additional child they have, or giving them tax breaks for each additional child they have? Do people like this?

IAN: I don't, I don't think we know yet. I mean, there's been some polling on discrete issues when they're presented as a coherent vision. I'm not sure how popular they will prove to be. That is what I personally am very curious about. By selecting Vance, Trump has put The New Right on the ballot for the first time in a meaningful way, and I don't think we know yet how Americans are going to respond to that. I mean, I think as people dig into Vance's intellectual influences, his political background, his associations with The New Right will come to the fore, and the vision that The New Right has put forward will come to the fore. I think there's a certain New Right aesthetic, and The New Right way of talking about American politics, which is not your grandfather's conservatism. Right. They adopt a rhetoric of, sort of, almost a revolutionary rhetoric. You know, they think that the project of postwar American conservatism grounded in sort of free market capitalism and foreign policy hawkishness has not only failed, but really harmed the people that Vance and others want to help. And he doesn't think just going backwards in time is gonna be enough. You know, they have a sort of revolutionary, insurgency mentality where they're forging forward, right? They're not trying to go back. And traditionally, political candidates who have adopted a sort of insurgent attitude have not done particularly well in American electoral politics. So I think that as a potential liability. You know, parties that do well generally emphasize stability, and things like that. And Vance's vision is not premised primarily on stability. I mean, he would say in the long term, it has been. The short term, it is premised on a pretty radical upheaval to American life. So I think it's a big question how voters will respond to that.

NOEL: All right. So JD Vance is an intellectual with a vision which makes him a very interesting character in Washington, DC. If Donald Trump should win, JD Vance will be vice president. Donald Trump doesn't particularly like sharing anything, including the spotlight. So JD Vance may have a vision here, but as vice president, will he be able to deliver on any of this?

IAN: Yeah. Vice presidents famously get shunted to the side.

*<CLIP> “VEEP”, SELINA MEYER: Hey Sue, did the president call?   
SUE: No.*

IAN: It's not a particularly coveted role in Washington. It tends to be highly ceremonial, you know, but different vice presidents have been able to exert different amounts of influence. I mean, think of Dick Cheney and the Bush White House.

SCORING <Melodica #2>

IAN: I think what we saw from the Trump term is that Trump's decision making depends in large part on who he's surrounded with and who he's listening to at any given time. Right. He is a malleable political figure, to put it diplomatically. And having a figure like Vance in the room means that you have a committed advocate of the New Right agenda in the room whenever Trump is making decisions, and that does not guarantee by any means the New Right agenda will be enacted into law, but at least means they will have a seat at the table, and the person filling that seat will be one of their strongest advocates and most committed members.

SCORING BUMP

NOEL: Politico’s Ian Ward. This episode was produced by Amanda Lewellyn and Miles Bryan, edited by Miranda Kennedy and Matt Collette, fact-checked by Hady Mawajdeh and Peter Balonon-Rosen, Patrick Boyd and Andrea Kristinsdotter are our engineers. I’m Noel King. It’s Today, Explained.

**[10 SECONDS OF SILENCE]**