

## **Star of the Right Loses His Base At the Border**

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### **Body**

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He supports tax cuts and the war in Iraq. He opposes stem cell research and the Medicare drug plan. He is a master of his movement's medium, talk radio. Jesus Christ is his personal savior and Ronald Reagan his political idol.

Conjure what might be called the perfect conservative, and chances are he would look a lot like Representative Mike Pence, the Indiana Republican who in just three terms has turned 100 House allies into a vanguard and himself into one of his party's rising stars.

Or that was the case until this spring when he sought compromise in the rancorous immigration debate. His complicated plan would strengthen border security and send illegal immigrants home, but let most of them quickly return. Since then, Mr. Pence -- named last year's Man of the Year by the conservative weekly Human Events -- has looked to some conservatives like this year's Benedict Arnold. They say he has lent his conservative prestige to a form of liberal amnesty.

Phyllis Schlafly of the Eagle Forum called his plan "a sick joke." Richard A. Viguerie, the direct-mail pioneer, threatened to punish politicians who supported it. Pat Buchanan, editor of The American Conservative, likened the betrayal to a scene from "The Godfather."

Perpetually genial, prematurely gray, Mr. Pence, 47, said, "I was taken aback by the level of invective."

"It's a test of the character of the conservative movement in the 21st century," he said. "We are either going to prove that we believe in the ideas enshrined on the Statue of Liberty or the American people will go looking elsewhere."

Mr. Pence -- who bills himself as "a Christian, a conservative and a Republican, in that order" -- pushed the plan on a recent trip across his district. He quoted the Bible. He quoted Ronald Reagan. He stood sweating in a tomato field beside Mexican workers. And when asked why an Indiana congressman was focused on the border, he responded with a ready phrase: "April 11, 1923."

That is when his Irish grandfather, Richard Michael Cawley, a Chicago bus driver, arrived on Ellis Island. "We were especially close," said Mr. Pence, who added that he sees his grandfather's thrift and hard work in today's immigrant generation.

Some members of the Muncie Chamber of Commerce had doubts. Some worried about cost. Some worried about compliance. But several complimented him for tackling a tough cause. "It is the greatest privilege of my life to represent you," he said.

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Though he comes from a family of Irish Catholic Democrats -- his father ran a string of gas stations -- Mr. Pence joined an evangelical fellowship group at Hanover College, drawn less by theological issues than by its more personal style of worship. His religion pulled him to the right. "I had a hard way of reconciling my commitment to biblical truth with the national Democratic Party's commitment to abortion on demand," he said.

His wife, Karen, teaches at a religious school, and sends out e-mail messages asking for the prayers of his supporters. "Please pray for the Holy Spirit to speak through him at the bbq," a recent message read.

Mr. Pence, two years out of law school, made his first Congressional run in 1988 and lost narrowly to a longtime Democratic incumbent, Phil Sharp. He tried again two years later, in a negative campaign that won him just 42 percent of the vote. Mr. Pence was devastated.

"What was most painful to me was the bile in my throat over how I had responded," he said. "My faith says if someone strikes you on the cheek, turn the other. My response, after being attacked by my opponent, was to empty the silos on this guy."

Mr. Pence delivered an unusual self-rebuke in an article called "Confessions of a Negative Campaigner." Then he ran a conservative research group, the Indiana Policy Review Foundation, and was host of a talk radio show in Indianapolis. The seat opened up again in 2000 and Mr. Pence squeaked in -- with civility, he said.

"I'm a conservative, but I'm not mad about it," he often says.

Arriving in Washington, he was dismayed at conservatives' support for government expansion. In 2001, he was one of 34 Republicans to oppose the No Child Left Behind Act, which expanded federal involvement in education. In 2003, he was one of 25 who opposed the Medicare drug benefit. "I was voting against big conservative government before it was cool," he said.

Congressional leaders hinted at reprisals, but the base applauded, especially after a 2004 speech in which he warned that the movement was drifting into "the dangerous and uncharted waters of big government."

Among those won over was Paul Weyrich, a fixture of movement conservatism. He said Mr. Pence had strong appeal among supporters of four major conservative causes: limited government, free enterprise, strong defense and traditional values.

"Nobody is perfect, but he comes pretty close," Mr. Weyrich said. "He is what I've been waiting for in terms of leadership."

Last year, Mr. Pence became head of the Republican Study Committee, a conservative caucus. He quickly expanded its profile, and, rivals note, his own. Mr. Pence, unlike many conservatives, courts the news media.

His influence was apparent last fall after Hurricane Katrina, when Washington was suddenly filled with talk of new aid for the needy. Concerned about the cost, Mr. Pence's group replied with Operation Offset, a plan to cut \$500 billion over 10 years in programs that included Medicaid, tax credits for the poor, and care for people with AIDS.

It outraged the leadership, which accused him of showboating, and failed to pass. But it quickly changed the political dynamics, from starting programs to cutting them. Five months later, with Mr. Pence nearby, President Bush signed a bill that cut \$39 billion over five years. "I think Operation Offset had something to do with that, though I would never boast of that," Mr. Pence said.

Edwin J. Feulner Jr., president of the Heritage Foundation, a conservative Washington group, said Mr. Pence "has really been central to the revival of principled conservatism in the House." Admirers have already begun a "Mike Pence for President" Web site.

But some colleagues grumble about what they call his self-promotion, and critics on the left see harshness behind the geniality. Robert Greenstein, executive director of the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, a liberal group, said that while the Republican effort was billed as deficit reduction, it in fact made the deficit larger. That is because

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the reductions were paired with \$70 billion of tax cuts, mostly for the very well-to-do. "This is Robin Hood in reverse," Mr. Greenstein said.

Barry Welsh, a Democrat challenging Mr. Pence this fall, is a Methodist minister who said, "I find it hypocritical that he claims such Christianity" while "cutting the benefits of those who need them."

Mr. Pence argued that tax cuts help the poor by revving the economy. That may eventually prove true, but despite large tax cuts the poverty rate has risen in each of the last four years.

"That's anecdotal," Mr. Pence said in an interview last fall. Then he offered an anecdote -- a story President Reagan told about a pipe fitter pleased to see the rich prosper, "because I've never been hired by a poor man."

With Republicans worried about losing control of Congress in the midterm elections this fall, some moderates say Mr. Pence's wing of the party has pushed it too far to the right, conservatives like Mr. Pence say that in accepting what they call big government, the party has not hewed to its conservative principles enough.

When Mr. Pence weighed in on immigration this spring, the issue, like much of the Republican agenda, was stalled and Republicans were deeply split. The House had passed a tough bill focusing on border security alone. The Senate had passed a broader measure that included a guest worker program and a path to citizenship for illegal immigrants already here.

Mr. Pence tried to offer something to everyone. He included provisions to bolster the borders. After two years, if the government certified that those changes were in place, a guest worker program would begin. Those here unlawfully would have to leave the country and apply at job-placement centers. By requiring re-entry, Mr. Pence argues, the plan avoids amnesty and respects the rule of law. The guest worker visas could be renewed, with a chance of citizenship after 17 years.

Mr. Bush sent an approving signal by inviting Mr. Pence to an Oval Office meeting. And the proposal won a Senate co-sponsor in Kay Bailey Hutchison, Republican of Texas.

The idea, at best, faces an uphill fight when Congress reconvenes next week. But Tamar Jacoby, a fellow at the conservative Manhattan Institute who sees promise in Mr. Pence's approach, said that without him, "the issue would be dead."

So his critics fear. Team America, a conservative political action committee, now has a feature on its Web site called "Pence Watch." Representative Tom Tancredo, Republican of Colorado, said the plan would encourage more illegal immigration and undermine cultural cohesion. But David Keene, chairman of the American Conservative Union, credits Mr. Pence's "courage to think outside the box."

Does he worry his conservative image has been tarnished?

"I'm not completely immune to that thought," Mr. Pence said, en route to a photo op in an Orestes, Ind., tomato field. Then he quoted from Micah in the Old Testament: "Do justice and love kindness."

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## Graphic

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Photo: Representative Mike Pence has advocated a more lenient approach to illegal immigrants than many of his fellow conservatives have. (Photo by Peter Wynn Thompson for The New York Times)(pg. A16)

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