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One for the Gipper

Indiana congressman, talk show darling and Reagan disciple Mike Pence is fast becoming the voice of small-government conservatives

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October 26, 2005

WASHINGTON -- With prematurely gray hair, soft features and chestnut-brown eyes, Mike Pence has the clean-cut, polished look of a television anchorman. He exudes a calm and relaxed presence characteristic of his native Midwest.

"Rush Limbaugh on decaf" is how he often describes himself.

And he leavens his points with humor. "I'm a conservative, but I'm not in a bad mood about it," he explains.

Though a third-term congressman from central Indiana who is a relative newcomer to the political power centers in Washington, Pence, 46, already is a favored guest on television news talk shows, such as Fox News' "O'Reilly Factor" and "Hannity & Colmes," and CNN's now-canceled "Crossfire." That national exposure, in turn, enhances his influence inside the Capitol.

"We liked having him on," said Debbie Berger, who was a producer for Crossfire. "He's smart. He's charming. He's nice. He's funny. He enjoys doing this stuff. He's got a lot of energy. He's not dry. He's good television. He's a good representative of the conservative perspective."

At a time when much of the Republican base is growing disenchanted with the direction of the party, Pence is emerging as an emphatic and effective conservative voice. Some believe it is only a matter of time before he achieves true national prominence.

"Mike is the tip of the spear for the small-government conservatives in Washington today," said former House Majority Leader Dick Armey.

His manner may be easy, but his views are unambiguous. He is a dedicated social conservative who publicly criticized the Senate's top Republican, Majority Leader Bill Frist (R-Tenn.), when the former heart surgeon came out this summer in favor of relaxing the federal ban on stem-cell research. And he is a determined budget-cutter who has repeatedly clashed with his own Republican party leaders over federal spending levels.

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He begins every day by reading the Bible. He works with a bronze bust of Ronald Reagan watching over him from across his office. And his vision of heaven, he said, is studying the free-market economist Adam Smith in the morning and riding horseback in the afternoon.

Pence's rising stature coincides with a confluence of events that have stoked conservative dissatisfaction with the Republican Party, accelerating and intensifying an inevitable debate on the party's direction during the Bush administration's second term as the president moves closer to lame-duck status.

A former radio talk show host and one-time president of a conservative think tank, the Indiana Policy Review Foundation, he is a comfortable, confident messenger for the right with a fluent understanding of the movement's ideas and a well-developed sense of the passions swirling among the party faithful.

Just last month, with one well-chosen press conference, Pence upended the political debate over how to handle the huge costs of recovering from Hurricane Katrina.

The reigning Republican leaders had rapidly reached a consensus to handle the hurricane's costs as emergency spending, simply adding the tab to the budget deficit.

The powerful House Majority Leader Tom DeLay (R-Texas), the "Hammer" who enforced discipline among Republicans, dismissed calls for spending cuts elsewhere to pay for the hurricane damage. DeLay, who has since resigned his post after being indicted in a campaign finance case, even boasted to reporters that Republicans already had pared down the fat in government "pretty good."

Bold move

Enter Pence. Within a day, he led a small band of like-minded conservatives out in front of a battery of television cameras, armed with a list of \$24 billion in pet projects attached to a major transportation bill that Congress had recently passed. That would be a good place to start cutting, they argued. For good measure, they offered up a menu of additional cuts that they said could save tens of billions of dollars more.

Pence's audacity riled the party leadership. The politically sacrosanct transportation projects, of course, remain untouched. But House Republican leaders quickly reversed course and now are promoting a proposal to offset part of the cost of hurricane relief with across-the-board budget cuts, as well as cuts in some entitlement programs such as health care for the poor, food stamps and farm subsidies.

Rep. Mark Souder (R-Ind.), a fellow conservative, described Pence's strategy in demanding the cuts as "a tremendous gamble."

"He clearly got called -- aggressively called -- on the carpet" by Republican leaders, Souder said. But, "he moved the system. Before he got up there, there wasn't even a discussion. It was just shovel the money out."

Over a lunch of salad and iced tea at the Republican party's Capitol Hill Club, Pence deflected questions about the response of top Republicans, whom other members of Congress said took him to the woodshed over the embarrassment he caused them.

"It is never easy to bring up the small matter of the bill in any social setting," Pence said.

Already, the budget cuts are in trouble, as some moderate Republicans refuse to go along with them. But Pence declared the fate of the spending cuts will be "a test of character" and warned he is ready to sound

the alarm about a party he believes is drifting "into the dangerous waters of big-government Republicanism."

"The Republican party inside the Beltway may have changed, but out there Republicans still believe government's too big, we spend too much, we have to have a strong defense, we have to act on our ideals, the sanctity of life," Pence said.

Some Republican leaders believe Pence fails to appreciate the accommodations that must be made to hold together a fractious party with a slender majority in Congress, and he may be too determined to maintain ideological purity at the cost of winning national elections. One Republican lobbyist with close ties to the House leadership said Pence is considered "a burr under the saddle."

"Is it more important to be 100 percent right or more important to be in the majority to get you toward where you want to be?" said Mike Stokke, deputy chief of staff to House Speaker Dennis Hastert (R-Ill.). "I think I know what Mike's answer would be. But I'm not sure."

Since taking the lead of the Republican Study Committee at the beginning of the year, he has charted a more aggressive course for the 106-member group of House conservatives, first confronting party leaders over budget rules and now again on how to pay for hurricane-related spending.

A spending machine

For many of the party's fiscally conservative supporters, the surge of spending for Katrina relief was the final straw from an administration that was spending at levels they considered unacceptable.

Even excluding spending on defense, homeland security and Katrina relief, discretionary federal spending has risen 33 percent since President Bush took office, according to the conservative Heritage Foundation. The Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank, reported that spending overall has grown faster under Bush than under Lyndon Johnson, who simultaneously waged the Vietnam War and launched the Great Society welfare programs.

Conservatives are nursing plenty of other grievances right now. Bush's recent nomination of Harriet Miers to the Supreme Court deeply disappointed social conservatives who expected a choice who would move the court unambiguously to the right. Illegal immigration has stirred a storm of criticism among grass-roots conservatives who blame the federal government for what they consider to be an out-of-control border. The botched response to Katrina sapped confidence in the Bush administration's competence. And, just like the rest of the country, conservatives are feeling the financial pinch of rising gasoline prices.

Meanwhile, a vacuum is opening in the Republican leadership. DeLay was forced to resign his leadership post after his indictment. Frist is under investigation for possible insider stock trading. White House political adviser Karl Rove is under investigation for perhaps leaking a CIA agent's identity. Bush's popularity has dropped to its lowest point ever, according to various national polls.

And the most recognizable potential candidates for the 2008 Republican presidential nomination, such as Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) and former New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, are hardly standard-bearers for the right.

"While they're impressive people and they're conservative on some issues, none of them is really an obvious leader of the conservative movement," said Bill Kristol, editor of the conservative Weekly Standard.

"The party faithful and the conservative grass roots have been searching for the next Ronald Reagan. And Mike Pence has been mentioned as someone who could fill the Gipper's shoes, even though he's still young and a relative political newcomer," said Stephen Moore, founder of the Free Enterprise Fund.

A metamorphosis

Like Reagan, who was once a Democrat and an admirer of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Pence's beliefs changed over time. He started out a Catholic and a Democrat, whose interest in politics was stirred during his youth by John Kennedy, a hero to his Irish family. Pence still has a childhood memory box stuffed with Kennedy memorabilia, he said.

But as a freshman at Hanover College in Indiana, Pence was drawn to Christian evangelical beliefs and committed to the faith on a weekend retreat.

"I had a growing interest in my Christian faith," Pence said. "As I continued to grow and mature, I found I was a bit more challenged in the evangelical faith."

Pence later met his wife, Karen, at an evangelical church service. She was playing guitar, and he caught up with her afterward.

"I told her I wanted to join the guitar group," Pence recalled. He never did, but they were engaged nine months later.

By the time he graduated college, Pence said, he had become a Republican, inspired by Reagan's hopeful economic message of self-reliance and concerned by the national Democratic Party's embrace of abortion rights and liberal social causes.

A few years after he graduated from the Indiana University Law School, he ran for Congress twice, losing in both 1988 and 1990. Beginning in 1994, he hosted a radio call-in show, eventually syndicated statewide, keeping Pence on the air three hours a day, six days a week. He was finally elected to Congress in 2000.

"To understand Mike Pence, you have to understand it took me 12 years to get to Congress," Pence said. "I try to get up every day and prayerfully approach my job in a way that people will say he did what he said he would do when he got here."

He was also one of 33 Republicans to vote against Bush's signature No Child Left Behind Act, opposing it as an enlargement of the federal role in education. And he was one of only 25 in the party to vote against the administration-supported Medicare prescription drug benefit. Pence considered it too costly.

Republican leaders held open the vote on the drug plan for three hours to twist arms to gain enough support. Pence likens those who withstood the pressure to the men at the Alamo.

Describing the current unrest among Republican conservatives, Pence said, "You can't look at that angst in a vacuum. . . . That angst has been building for four years."

Pence did vote for a farm bill that dramatically expanded subsidies for farmers, a key constituency in his largely rural district. But he now says he regrets the vote and would not support a new farm bill, unless costs were reduced and farmers exposed to greater market discipline.

He is willing to take on unconventional issues. While most conservatives are distrustful of the media, Pence has taken up the cause of a federal shield law to protect reporters' confidential sources, arguing that a vigorous press is a check on power in keeping with conservatives' goal of limited government. Pence argues that Republicans sacrifice their advantage as the party in control if they muddy their message.

Strong words

"One more expansion of the Department of Education, one more big expansion of entitlements, and that [Republican] coalition will be shattered," Pence said. "If Republicans keep answering every problem with an expansion of big government, eventually people are going to get the professionals, [the Democrats] the guys who do big government."

Unlike most Midwestern members of Congress, who typically keep their families back home and commute to Washington every week, Pence's family lives with him in Springfield, Va., while Congress is in session. His three children attend a suburban Virginia Christian school, where his wife also works as an art teacher.

On a recent day, he was in his study at 6 a.m., reading the first chapter of the Book of Joshua, he said. The lesson recounts the commission that God gave the Old Testament prophet to lead the Jewish people out of the wilderness and into the Promised Land.

"Be strong, be courageous and do the work" is the lesson he said he took from the reading.

"I'm not a supremely confident man, but I have faith in God and faith in these ideas," he added.

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