

God's Plan for Mike Pence

Will the vice president—and the religious right—be rewarded for their embrace of Donald Trump?



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NO MAN CAN serve two masters, the Bible teaches, but Mike Pence is giving it his all. It's a sweltering September afternoon in Anderson, Indiana, and the vice president has returned to his home state to deliver the Good News of the Republicans' recently unveiled tax plan. The visit is a big deal for Anderson, a fading manufacturing hub about 20 miles outside Muncie that hasn't hosted a sitting president or vice president in 65 years—a fact noted by several warm-up speakers. To mark this historic civic occasion, the cavernous factory where the event is being held has been transformed. Idle machinery has been shoved to the perimeter to make room for risers and cameras and a gargantuan American flag, which—along with bleachers full of constituents carefully selected for their ethnic diversity and ability to stay awake during speeches about tax policy—will serve as the TV-ready backdrop for Pence's remarks.

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When the time comes, Pence takes the stage and greets the crowd with a booming "Hellooooo, Indiana!" He



He delivers this message with a slight chuckle that has a certain, almost subversive quality to it. Watch Pence give enough speeches, and you'll notice that this often happens when he's in front of a friendly crowd. He'll be witnessing to evangelicals at a mega-church, or addressing conservative supporters at a rally, and when the moment comes for him to pass along the president's well-wishes, the words are invariably accompanied by an amused little chuckle that prompts knowing laughter from the attendees. It's almost as if, in that brief, barely perceptible moment, Pence is sending a message to those with ears to hear—that he recognizes the absurdity of his situation; that he knows just what sort of man he's working for; that while things may look bad now, there is a grand purpose at work here, a plan that will manifest itself in due time. *Let not your hearts be troubled*, he seems to be saying. *I've got this*.

And then, all at once, Pence is back on message. In his folksy Midwestern drawl, he recites Republican aphorisms about “job creators” and regulatory “red tape,” and heralds the many supposed triumphs of Trump's young presidency. As he nears the end of his remarks, his happy-warrior buoyancy gives way to a more sober cadence. “We've come to a pivotal moment in the life of this country,” Pence soulfully intones. “It's a good time to pray for America.” His voice rising in righteous fervor, the vice president promises an opening of the heavens. “If His people who are called by His name will humble themselves and pray,” he proclaims, “He'll hear from heaven, and He'll heal this land!”

It's easy to see how Pence could put so much faith in the possibilities of divine intervention. The very fact that he is standing behind a lectern bearing the vice-presidential seal is, one could argue, a loaves-and-fishes-level miracle. Just a year earlier, he was an [embattled small-state governor](#) with underwater approval ratings, dismal reelection prospects, and a national reputation in tatters. In many ways, Pence was on the same doomed trajectory as the conservative-Christian movement he'd long championed—once a political force to be reckoned with, now a battered relic of the culture wars.

Because God works in mysterious ways (or, at the very least, has a postmodern sense of humor), it was Donald J. Trump—[gracer of Playboy covers](#), delighter of shock jocks, collector of mistresses—who descended from the mountaintop in the summer of 2016, GOP presidential nomination in hand, offering salvation to both Pence and the religious right. The question of whether they should wed themselves to such a man was not without its theological considerations. But after eight years of Barack Obama and a string of disorienting political defeats, conservative Christians were in retreat and out of options. So they placed their faith in Trump—and then, incredibly, he won.

In Pence, Trump has found an obedient deputy whose willingness to suffer indignity and humiliation at the pleasure of the president appears boundless. When Trump comes under fire for describing white nationalists as “[very fine people](#),” Pence is there to assure the world that he is actually [a man of great decency](#). When Trump needs someone to fly across the country to an NFL game so he can [walk out in protest](#) of national-anthem kneelers, Pence heads for Air Force Two.

Meanwhile, Pence's presence in the White House has been a boon for the religious right. Evangelical leaders across the country point to his record on abortion and religious freedom and liken him to a prophet

karat-gold model of what we want in an evangelical politician,” Richard Land, the president of the Southern Evangelical Seminary and one of Trump’s faith advisers, told me. “I don’t know anyone who’s more consistent in bringing his evangelical-Christian worldview to public policy.”

But what does Pence make of his own improbable rise to the vice presidency, and how does he reconcile his faith with serving a man like Trump? Over the past several months, I’ve spoken with dozens of people who have known the vice president throughout his life—from college fraternity brothers and longtime friends to trusted advisers and political foes. (Pence himself declined my requests for an interview.) While many of them expressed surprise and even bewilderment at the heights of power Pence had attained, those who know him best said he sees no mystery in why he’s in the White House. “If you’re Mike Pence, and you believe what he believes, you know God had a plan,” says Ralph Reed, an evangelical power broker and a friend of the vice president’s.

Pence has so far showed absolute deference to the president—and as a result he has become one of the most influential figures in the White House, with a broad portfolio of responsibilities and an unprecedented level of autonomy. But for all his aw-shucks modesty, Pence is a man who believes heaven and Earth have conspired to place him a heartbeat—or an impeachment vote—away from the presidency. At some crucial juncture in the not-too-distant future, that could make him a threat to Trump.

PENCE’S PUBLIC PERSONA can seem straight out of the Columbus, Indiana, of his youth, a quiet suburb of Indianapolis where conformity was a virtue and old-fashioned values reigned. His dad ran a chain of convenience stores; his mom was a homemaker who took care of him and his five siblings. The Pences were devout Irish-Catholic Democrats, and Mike and his brothers served as altar boys at St. Columba Catholic Church.

Pence was “a fat little kid,” he told a local newspaper, “the real pumpkin in the pickle patch.”

Young Mike did not initially thrive in this setting. He was useless at football (he later sized up his own abilities as “one grade above the blocking sled”), and he lacked the natural athleticism of his brothers, who were “lean and hard and thin.” Pence was “a fat little kid,” he told a local newspaper in 1988, “the real pumpkin in the pickle patch.”

But by the time Pence arrived at Hanover College—a small liberal-arts school in southern Indiana—he had slimmed down, discovered a talent for public speaking, and developed something akin to swagger. The yearbooks from his undergraduate days are filled with photos that portray Pence as a kind of campus cliché: the dark-haired, square-jawed stud strumming an acoustic guitar on the quad as he leads a gaggle of coeds

in a sing-along. In one picture, Pence mugs for the camera in a fortune-teller costume with a girl draped over his lap; in another, he poses goofily in an unbuttoned shirt that shows off his torso.

Pence wasn't a bad student, but he wasn't especially bookish either, managing a B-plus average amid a busy campus social life. As a freshman, he joined Phi Gamma Delta and became an enthusiastic participant in the Greek experience. Dan Murphy, a former fraternity brother of Pence's who now teaches history at Hanover, told me that the "Phi Gams" were an eclectic bunch. "You had in that fraternity house everything from the sort of evangelical-Christian crowd to some fairly hard-core drug users." Pence was friendly with all of them, and in his sophomore year was elected president of the fraternity.

Murphy and Pence lived in neighboring rooms, and made a habit of attending Catholic Mass together on Sunday nights. On their walks back home, they often talked about their futures, and it became clear to Murphy that his friend had a much stronger sense of his "mission in the world" than the average undergrad. Pence agonized over his "calling." He talked about entering the priesthood, but ultimately felt drawn instead to politics, a realm where he believed he could harness God's power to do good. It was obvious to his fraternity brothers, Murphy told me, that Pence wanted to be president one day.

Pence underwent two conversions in college that would shape the rest of his life. The first came in the spring of 1978, when he road-tripped to Kentucky with some evangelical friends for a [music festival](#) billed as the Christian Woodstock. After a day of rocking out to Jesus-loving prog-rock bands and born-again Bob Dylan imitators, Pence found himself sitting in a light rain, yearning for a more personal relationship with Christ than was afforded by the ritualized Catholicism of his youth. "My heart really, finally broke with a deep realization that what had happened on the cross in some infinitesimal way had happened for me," Pence [recounted in March 2017](#). It was there, he said, that he gave his life to Jesus.

The other conversion was a partisan one. Pence had entered college a staunch supporter of Jimmy Carter, and he viewed the 1980 presidential election as a contest between a "good Christian" and a "vacuous movie star." But President Ronald Reagan won Pence over—instilling in him an appreciation for both movement conservatism and the leadership potential of vacuous entertainers that would serve him well later in life.

Murphy told me another story about Pence that has stayed with him. During their sophomore year, the Phi Gamma Delta house found itself perpetually on probation. The movie *Animal House* had recently come out, and the fraternity brothers were constantly re-creating their favorite scenes, with toga parties, outlandish pranks, and other miscellaneous mischief. Most vexing to the school's administration was their violation of Hanover's strict alcohol prohibition. The Phi Gams devised elaborate schemes to smuggle booze into the house, complete with a network of campus lookouts. Pence was not a particularly hard partyer, but he gamely presided over these efforts, and when things went sideways he was often called upon to smooth things over with the adults.

By college, Pence had slimmed down and developed something akin to swagger. The yearbooks from his time at Hanover College, in southern Indiana, depict him as a popular, square-jawed hunk. (Hanover College)

One night, during a rowdy party, Pence and his fraternity brothers got word that an associate dean was on his way to the house. They scrambled to hide the kegs and plastic cups, and then Pence met the administrator at the door.

“We know you’ve got a keg,” the dean told Pence, according to Murphy. Typically when scenes like this played out, one of the brothers would take the fall, claiming that all the alcohol was his and thus sparing the house from formal discipline. Instead, Pence led the dean straight to the kegs and admitted that they belonged to the fraternity. The resulting punishment was severe. “They really raked us over the coals,” Murphy said. “The whole house was locked down.” Some of Pence’s fraternity brothers were furious with him—but he managed to stay on good terms with the administration. Such good terms, in fact, that after he graduated, in 1981, the school offered him a job in the admissions office.

Decades later, when Murphy read about Pence vying for a spot on the presidential ticket with Donald Trump, he recognized a familiar quality in his old friend. “Somewhere in the midst of all that genuine humility and good feeling, this is a guy who’s got that ambition,” Murphy told me. And he wondered, “Is Mike’s religiosity a way of justifying that ambition to himself?”

FOR ALL PENCE’S outward piousness, he’s kept the details of his spiritual journey opaque. Despite his conversion to evangelical Christianity in college, he married his wife, Karen, in a Catholic ceremony and until the mid-’90s periodically referred to himself as an “evangelical Catholic.” That formulation might befuddle theologians, but it reveals the extraordinary degree to which Pence’s personal religious evolution paralleled the rise of the religious right.

Indeed, it was just a year after Pence’s born-again experience in Kentucky that Jerry Falwell founded the

political force. In the decades that followed, white evangelicals forged an alliance with conservative Catholics to fight abortion, gay marriage, and an encroaching secularism that they saw as a threat to their religious freedom. With conservative believers feeling under siege, denominational differences began to melt away.

In 1988, at age 29, Pence launched his first bid for Congress. He garnered attention by riding a single-speed bicycle around his district in sneakers and short shorts, dodging aggravated motorists and drumming up conversations with prospective voters on the sidewalk. It was a perfectly Pencian gimmick—earnest, almost unbearably cheesy—and it helped him win the Republican nomination. But he was unable to defeat the Democratic incumbent, Phil Sharp.

Pence tried again two years later, this time ditching the bike in favor of vicious attack ads. The race is remembered as one of the nastiest in Indiana history. In one notorious Pence campaign spot, an actor dressed as a cartoonish Arab sheikh thanked Sharp for advancing the interests of foreign oil. The tone of the campaign was jarring coming from a candidate who had nurtured such a wholesome image, a contrast memorably captured in an *Indianapolis Star* headline: “Pence Urges Clean Campaign, Calls Opponent a Liar.” He ended up losing by 19 points after it was revealed that he was using campaign funds to pay his mortgage and grocery bills (a practice that was then legal but has since been outlawed).

Afterward, a humbled Pence attempted public repentance by personal essay. His article, “[Confessions of a Negative Campaigner](#),” ran in newspapers across the state. “Christ Jesus came to save sinners,” the essay began, quoting 1 Timothy, “among whom I am foremost of all.”

With two failed congressional bids behind him, Pence decided to change tack. In 1992, he debuted a conservative talk-radio show that he described as “Rush Limbaugh on decaf.” The quaint joke belied the meticulousness with which Pence went about building his local media empire. “He knew exactly what he wanted his brand to be and who his audience was,” says Ed Feigenbaum, the publisher of a state-politics tip sheet, whom Pence often consulted. Most of his listeners were “retirees and conservative housewives,” Feigenbaum says, and Pence carefully catered to them. Over the next eight years, he expanded his radio show to 18 markets, started hosting a talk show on a local TV station, launched a proto-blog, and published a newsletter, “The Pence Report,” which locals remember primarily for its frequent typos and Pence’s lovingly drawn political cartoons.

“His Mikeness,” as he became known on the air, began each radio show with a signature opening line—“Greetings across the amber waves of grain”—and filled the hours with a mix of interviews, listener calls, and medium-hot takes. Pence’s [commentary from this period](#) is a near-perfect time capsule of ’90s culture-war trivia. He railed against assisted suicide (“Kevorkian is a monster”) and fretted about the insufficient punishment given to a female Air Force pilot who had engaged in an extramarital affair (“Is adultery no longer a big deal in Indiana and in America?”). He mounted a rousing defense of Big Tobacco (“Despite the hysteria from the political class and the media, smoking doesn’t kill”) and lamented parents’ growing reliance on day care (pop culture “has sold the big lie that ‘Mom doesn’t matter’”).

Pence also demonstrated a knack for seizing on more-creative wedge issues. For instance, a 1995 initiative to reintroduce otters into Indiana’s wildlife population became, in Pence’s able hands, a frightening example of Big Government run amok. “State-sanctioned, sanitized otters today,” he warned, ominously. “Buffaloes tomorrow?”

Despite Pence’s on-air culture-warring, he rarely came off as disagreeable. He liked to describe himself as “a Christian, a conservative, and a Republican, in that order,” and he was careful to show respect for opposing viewpoints. “Nobody ever left an interview not liking Mike,” says Scott Uecker, the radio executive who oversaw Pence’s show.

By the time a congressional seat opened up ahead of the 2000 election, Pence was a minor Indiana celebrity and state Republicans were urging him to run. In the summer of 1999, as he was mulling the decision, he took his family on a trip to Colorado. One day while horseback riding in the mountains, he and Karen looked heavenward and saw two red-tailed hawks soaring over them. They took it as a sign, Karen recalled years later: Pence would run again, but this time there would be “no flapping.” He would glide to victory.

After two failed bids for Congress, Pence was elected in 2000 and served until 2013, when he became the governor of Indiana. (Manuel Balce Ceneta / AP)

TO HIS COLLEAGUES on Capitol Hill—an overwhelmingly secular place where even many Republicans privately sneer at people of faith—everything about the Indiana congressman screamed “Bible thumper.” He was known to pray with his staffers, and often cited scripture to explain his votes. In a 2002 interview with *Congressional Quarterly*, for example, he explained, “My support for Israel stems largely from my personal faith. In the Bible, God promises Abraham, ‘Those who bless you I will bless, and those who curse you I will curse.’” He became a champion of the fight to restrict abortion and defund Planned Parenthood.

Pence didn’t have a reputation for legislative acumen (“I would not call Mike a policy wonk,” one former staffer told the *Indianapolis Monthly*), and some of his colleagues called him a nickname behind his back: “Mike Dense.” But he did have sharp political instincts. Before long, he was climbing the leadership ranks and making connections with key figures in the conservative-Christian establishment. *The New Yorker*’s Jane Mayer [has documented](#) Pence’s close ties to the Koch brothers and other GOP mega-donors, but his roots in the religious right are even deeper. In 2011, as he began plotting a presidential run in the upcoming election cycle, Pence met with Ralph Reed, the evangelical power broker, to seek his advice.

Reed told Pence he should return home and get elected governor of Indiana first, then use the statehouse as a launching pad for a presidential bid. He said a few years in the governor’s mansion—combined with his

Pence took Reed's advice, and in 2012 launched a gubernatorial bid. Casting himself as the heir to the popular outgoing governor, Mitch Daniels, he avoided social issues and ran on a pragmatic, business-friendly platform. He used Ronald Reagan as a political style guru and told his ad makers that he wanted his campaign commercials to have "that 'Morning in America' feel." He meticulously fine-tuned early cuts of the ads, asking his consultants to edit this or reframe that or zoom in here instead of there.

But he wasn't willing to win at all costs. When the race tightened in the homestretch, Pence faced immense pressure from consultants to go negative. A former adviser recalls heated conference calls in which campaign brass urged him to green-light an attack ad on his Democratic opponent, John Gregg. Pence refused. "He didn't want to be a hypocrite," the former adviser says.

Pence won the race anyway, and set about cutting taxes and taking on local unions—burnishing a résumé that would impress Republican donors and Iowa caucus-goers. The governor's stock began to rise in Washington, where he was widely viewed as a contender for the 2016 presidential nomination.

Then, in early 2015, Pence stumbled into a culture-war debacle that would come to define his governorship. At the urging of conservative-Christian leaders in Indiana, the GOP-controlled state legislature passed a bill that would have allowed religious business owners to deny services to gay customers in certain circumstances. Pence signed it into law in a closed-press ceremony at the statehouse, surrounded by nuns, monks, and right-wing lobbyists. A photo of the signing was released, and all hell broke loose. Corporate leaders threatened to stop adding jobs in Indiana, and national organizations began pulling scheduled conventions from the state. The NCAA, which is headquartered in Indianapolis, put out a statement suggesting that the law might imperil "future events." *The Indianapolis Star* ran a rare front-page editorial under an all-caps headline: "FIX THIS NOW."

Caught off guard by the controversy, Pence accepted an invitation to appear on *This Week With George Stephanopoulos*, where he intended to make the case that the law wasn't anti-gay but rather pro-religious liberty. What took place instead was an excruciating 12-minute interview in which Pence awkwardly danced around the same straightforward question: Does this law allow a Christian florist to refuse service for a same-sex wedding? "George, look," Pence said at one point, sounding frustrated, "the issue here is, you know, is tolerance a two-way street or not?"

For Pence—and the conservative-Christian movement he represented—this was more than just a talking point. In recent years, the religious right had been abruptly forced to pivot from offense to defense in the culture wars—abandoning the "family values" crusades and talk of "remoralizing America," and focusing its energies on self-preservation. Conservative Christians had lost the battles over school prayer, sex education, and pornography censorship, and the Supreme Court was poised to legalize same-sex marriage. Meanwhile, a widespread decline in churchgoing and religious affiliation had contributed to a growing anxiety among conservative believers. By 2017, white evangelicals would tell pollsters that Christians faced more discrimination in America than Muslims did.

To many Christians, the backlash against Indiana's "religious freedom" bill was a frightening sign of the

conquest. “Many evangelicals were experiencing the sense of an almost existential threat,” Russell Moore, a leader of the Southern Baptist Convention, told me. It was only a matter of time, he said, before cultural elites’ scornful attitudes would help drive Christians into the arms of a strongman like Trump. “I think there needs to be a deep reflection on the left about how they helped make this happen.”

After seven chaotic days, Pence caved and signed a revised version of the religious-freedom bill—but by then it was too late. His approval ratings were in free fall, Democrats were raising money to defeat him in the next gubernatorial election, and the [political obituaries](#) were being written. Things looked grimmer for Pence, and the religious right, than they ever had before.

DELIVERANCE MANIFESTED ITSELF to Mike Pence on the back nine of Donald Trump’s golf course in New Jersey. It was the Fourth of July weekend, and the two men were sizing each other up as potential running mates. Each had his own hesitations. Coming into the game, Trump had formed an opinion of the Indiana governor as prudish, stiff, and embarrassingly poor, according to one longtime associate. Pence, meanwhile, had spent the primaries privately shaking his head at Trump’s campaign-trail antics, and had endorsed Senator Ted Cruz for the nomination. But as the two men played golf, Pence asked what his job description would be if they wound up in the White House together. Trump gave him the same answer he’d been dangling in front of other prospective running mates for weeks: He wanted “the most consequential vice president ever.” Pence was sold.

Before flying out to New Jersey, Pence had called Kellyanne Conway, a top Trump adviser, whom he’d known for years, and asked for her advice on how to handle the meeting. Conway had told him to talk about “stuff outside of politics,” and suggested he show his eagerness to learn from the billionaire. “I knew they would enjoy each other’s company,” Conway told me, adding, “Mike Pence is someone whose faith allows him to subvert his ego to the greater good.”

True to form, Pence spent much of their time on the course kissing Trump’s ring. *You’re going to be the next president of the United States*, he said. *It would be the honor of a lifetime to serve you*. Afterward, he made a point of gushing to the press about Trump’s golf game. “He beat me like a drum,” Pence confessed, to Trump’s delight.

The consensus among the campaign’s top political strategists was that a Trump–Pence ticket was their best shot at winning in November. After a bitter primary season, Trump’s campaign had moved swiftly to shore up support from conservative Christians, who advisers worried would stay home on Election Day. Trump released a list of potential Supreme Court nominees with unimpeachably pro-life records and assembled an evangelical advisory board composed of high-profile faith leaders.

One of the men asked to join the board was Richard Land, of the Southern Evangelical Seminary. When the campaign approached him with the offer, Land says, he was perplexed. “You do know that Trump was my last choice, right?” he said. But he ultimately accepted, and when a campaign aide asked what his first piece of advice was, he didn’t hesitate: “Pick Mike Pence.”

Nonetheless, as decision time approached, Trump was leaning toward New Jersey Governor Chris Christie, a fellow bridge-and-tunnel loudmouth with whom he had more natural chemistry. The candidate's advisers repeatedly warned that the "Bridgegate" fiasco would make Christie a liability in the general election. But they were unable to get through to Trump.

Then, on July 12, a miracle: During a short campaign swing through Indiana, Trump got word that his plane had broken down on the runway, and that he would need to spend the night in Indianapolis. With nowhere else to go, Trump accepted an invitation to dine with the Pences.

In fact, according to two former Trump aides, there was no problem with the plane. Paul Manafort, who was then serving as the campaign's chairman, had made up the story to keep the candidate in town an extra day and allow him to be wooed by Pence. The gambit worked: Three days later, Trump announced Pence as his running mate.

On the stump and in interviews, Pence spoke of Trump in a tone that bordered on worshipful. One of his rhetorical tics was to praise the breadth of his running mate's shoulders. Trump was, Pence proclaimed, a "broad-shouldered leader," in possession of "broad shoulders and a big heart," who had "the kind of broad shoulders" that enabled him to endure criticism while he worked to return "broad-shouldered American strength to the world stage."

Campaign operatives discovered that anytime Trump did something outrageous or embarrassing, they could count on Pence to clean it up. "He was our top surrogate by far," said one former senior adviser to Trump. "He was this mild-mannered, uber-Christian guy with a Midwestern accent telling voters, 'Trump is a good man; I know what's in his heart.' It was *very* convincing—you wanted to trust him. You'd be sitting there listening to him and thinking, *Yeah, maybe Trump is a good man!*"

According to several sources, Pence wasn't just thinking about dropping out—he was contemplating a coup.

Even some of Trump's most devoted loyalists marveled at what Pence was willing to say. There was no talking point too preposterous, no fixed reality too plain to deny—if they needed Pence to defend the boss, he was in. When, during the vice-presidential debate, in early October, he was confronted with a barrage of damning quotes and questionable positions held by his running mate, Pence responded with unnerving message discipline, dismissing documented facts as "nonsense" and smears.

It was the kind of performance—a blur of half-truths and "whatabout"s and lies—that could make a good Christian queasy. But people close to Pence say he felt no conflict between his campaign duties and his

president believes strongly in a scriptural concept evangelicals call “servant leadership.” The idea is rooted in the Gospels, where Jesus models humility by washing his disciples’ feet and teaches, “Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave.”

When Pence was in Congress, he instructed his aides to have a “servant’s attitude” when dealing with constituents. Later, as the chairman of the House Republican Conference, he saw his job as being a servant to his fellow GOP lawmakers. And when he accepted the vice-presidential nomination, he believed he was committing to humbly submit to the will of Donald Trump. “Servant leadership is biblical,” Short told me. “That’s at the heart of it for Mike, and it comes across in his relationship with the president.”

Another close friend of Pence’s explained it to me this way: “His faith teaches that you’re under authority at all times. Christ is under God’s authority, man is under Christ’s authority, children are under the parents’ authority, employees are under the employer’s authority.”

“Mike,” he added, “always knows who’s in charge.”

ON FRIDAY, OCTOBER 7, 2016, *The Washington Post* published the *Access Hollywood* tape that showed Trump gloating about his penchant for grabbing women “by the pussy,” and instantly upended the campaign. Republicans across the country withdrew their endorsements, and conservative editorial boards called on Trump to drop out of the race. Most alarming to the aides and operatives inside Trump Tower, Mike Pence suddenly seemed at risk of going rogue.

Trump’s phone calls to his running mate reportedly went unreturned, and anonymous quotes began appearing in news stories describing Pence as “beside himself” over the revelation. One campaign staffer told me that when she was asked on TV the day after the tape came out whether Pence would remain on the ticket, she ad-libbed that, yes, he was 100 percent committed to Trump. She remembers walking away from the set and thinking, “*I have no idea if what I just said is true.*”

It’s been [reported](#) that Pence sent Trump a letter saying he needed time to decide whether he could stay with the campaign. But in fact, according to several Republicans familiar with the situation, he wasn’t just thinking about dropping out—he was contemplating a coup. Within hours of *The Post*’s bombshell, Pence made it clear to the Republican National Committee that he was ready to take Trump’s place as the party’s nominee. Such a move just four weeks before Election Day would have been unprecedented—but the situation seemed dire enough to call for radical action.

Already, Reince Priebus’s office was being flooded with panicked calls from GOP officials and donors urging the RNC chairman to get rid of Trump by whatever means necessary. One Republican senator called on the party to engage emergency protocols to nominate a new candidate. RNC lawyers huddled to explore an obscure legal mechanism by which they might force Trump off the ticket. Meanwhile, a small group of billionaires was trying to put together money for a “buyout”—even going so far as to ask a Trump associate how much money the candidate would require to walk away from the race. According to someone with knowledge of the talks, they were given an answer of \$800 million. (It’s unclear whether Trump was aware

of this discussion or whether the offer was actually made.) Republican donors and party leaders began buzzing about making Pence the nominee and drafting Condoleezza Rice as his running mate.

Amid the chaos, Trump convened a meeting of his top advisers in his Manhattan penthouse. He went around the room and asked each person for his damage assessment. Priebus bluntly told Trump he could either drop out immediately or lose in a historic landslide. According to someone who was present, Priebus added that Pence and Rice were “ready to step in.” (An aide to the vice president denied that Pence sent Trump a letter and that he ever talked with the RNC about becoming the nominee. Priebus did not respond to requests for comment.)

The furtive plotting, several sources told me, was not just an act of political opportunism for Pence. He was genuinely shocked by the *Access Hollywood* tape. In the short time they’d known each other, Trump had made an effort to convince Pence that—beneath all the made-for-TV bluster and bravado—he was a good-hearted man with faith in God. On the night of the vice-presidential debate, for example, Trump had left a voicemail letting Pence know that he’d just said a prayer for him. The couple was appalled by the video, however. Karen in particular was “disgusted,” says a former campaign aide. “She finds him reprehensible—just totally vile.”

Yet Pence might also have thought he glimpsed something divine in that moment of political upheaval—a parting of the seas, God’s hand reaching down to make his will known. Marc Short told me that in moments of need, Pence turns to a favorite passage in Jeremiah: “For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.” Short said, “Mike believes strongly in the sovereignty of God, and knowing that the Lord has a plan for him.”

Whatever God had planned for Mike Pence, however, it was not to make him the Republican nominee that weekend. Trump proved defiant in the face of pressure from party leaders. “They thought they were going to be able to get him to drop out before the second debate,” said a former campaign aide. “Little did they know, he has no shame.” Indeed, two days after the tape was released, Trump showed up in St. Louis for the debate with a group of Bill Clinton accusers in tow, ranting about how Hillary’s husband had done things to women that were far worse than his own “locker-room talk.” The whole thing was a circus—and it worked. By the time Trump left St. Louis, he had, in pundit-speak, “stopped the bleeding,” and by the next day, Pence was back on the stump. The campaign stabilized. The race tightened. And on the night of November 8, 2016, Pence found himself standing on a ballroom stage in Midtown Manhattan—silently, obediently, servant-leaderly—while Trump delivered the unlikeliest of victory speeches.

BACK IN INDIANA, Pence’s Trump apologia on the campaign trail surprised those who knew him. In political circles, there had been a widespread, bipartisan recognition that Pence was a decent man with a genuine devotion to his faith. But after watching him in 2016, many told me, they believed Pence had sold out.

Scott Pelath, the Democratic minority leader in the Indiana House of Representatives, said that watching Pence vouch for Trump made him sad. “Ah, Mike,” he sighed. “Ambition got the best of him.” It’s an

marveled, “The number of compromises he made to get this job, when you think about it, is pretty staggering.”

Of course, Pence is far from the only conservative Christian to be accused of having sold his soul. Trump’s early evangelical supporters were a motley crew of televangelists and prosperity preachers, and they have been rewarded with outsize influence in the White House. Pastor Ralph Drollinger, for example, caught Trump’s attention in December 2015, when he said in a radio interview, “America’s in such desperate straits—especially economically—that if we don’t have almost a benevolent dictator to turn things around, I just don’t think it’s gonna happen through our governance system.” Now Drollinger runs a weekly Bible study in the West Wing.

But the president has also enjoyed overwhelming support from rank-and-file conservative Christians. He won an astonishing 81 percent of white evangelicals’ votes, more than any Republican presidential candidate on record. And while his national approval rating hovers below 40 percent, poll after poll finds his approval rating among white evangelicals in the high 60s. The fact that such an ungodly president could retain a firm grip on the religious right has been the source of much soul-searching—and theological debate—within the movement.

On one side, there are those who argue that good Christians are obligated to support any leader, no matter how personally wicked he may be, who stands up for religious freedom and fights sinful practices such as abortion. Richard Land told me that those who withhold their support from Trump because they’re uncomfortable with his moral failings will “become morally accountable for letting the greater evil prevail.”

On the other side of the debate is a smaller group that believes the Christians allying themselves with Trump are putting the entire evangelical movement at risk. Russell Moore, of the Southern Baptist Convention, has made this case forcefully. In a *New York Times* [op-ed in September 2015](#), Moore wrote that for evangelicals to embrace Trump “would mean that we’ve decided to join the other side of the culture war, that image and celebrity and money and power and social Darwinist ‘winning’ trump the conservation of moral principles and a just society.”

Moore and others worry that conservative Christians’ support for Trump has already begun to warp their ideals. Consider just one data point: In 2011, a poll by the Public Religion Research Institute found that only 30 percent of white evangelicals believed “an elected official who commits an immoral act in their personal life can still behave ethically and fulfill their duties in their public and professional life.” By 2016, that number had risen to 72 percent. “This is really a sea change in evangelical ethics,” Robert P. Jones, the head of the institute and the author of *The End of White Christian America*, told me. “They have moved to an ends-justifies-the-means style of politics that would have been unimaginable before this last campaign.”

But even as the debate rages on, there is one thing virtually all conservative Christians seem to agree on: Mike Pence. “He’s an incredibly popular figure,” Moore told me. “Evangelicals who disagree about all sorts of things still respect Mike Pence. Regardless of how they voted or what they think about Trump, they feel a sense of identification with him, and trust in him.”

Some prominent evangelicals have gone even further to describe Pence's role—reverently invoking biblical heroes who aligned themselves with flawed worldly leaders to do God's will. One pastor compared Pence to Mordechai, who ascended to the right hand of a Persian king known for throwing lavish parties and discarding his wife after she refused to appear naked in front of his friends. Pence has also drawn comparisons to Daniel—who served a procession of godless rulers—and to Joseph of Egypt, the valiant servant of God who won the favor of an impetuous pharaoh known for throwing servants in prison when they offended him.

Pastor Mark Burns—a South Carolina televangelist who was among the first to sign on as a faith adviser to Trump—told me Pence's role in the administration is like that of Jesus, who once miraculously calmed a storm that was threatening to sink the boat on which he was traveling with his disciples. (Burns, who stressed that he was not equating Pence with the Savior, said Trump is represented in this analogy by one of Jesus's more “foulmouthed” apostles.) “Mike Pence is there praying over the White House every day,” Burns said. And in this tempestuous political climate, the success of Trump's presidency may depend on those intercessions. “It takes somebody who knows when you're headed toward a storm to be there praying for you.”

THE RELIGIOUS RIGHT began reaping the rewards of Trump's victory almost immediately, when the president-elect put Pence in charge of the transition. Given wide latitude on staffing decisions, Pence promptly set about filling the federal government with like-minded allies. Of the 15 Cabinet secretaries Trump picked at the start of his presidency, eight were evangelicals. It was, gushed Ted Cruz, “the most conservative Cabinet in decades.” Pence also [reportedly played a key role](#) in getting Neil Gorsuch nominated to the Supreme Court.

Pence understood the price of his influence. To keep Trump's ear required frequent public performances of loyalty and submission—and Pence made certain his inner circle knew that enduring such indignities was part of the job. Once, while interviewing a prospective adviser during the transition, Pence cleared the room so they could speak privately. “Look, I'm in a difficult position here,” Pence said, according to someone familiar with the meeting. “I'm going to have to 100 percent defend everything the president says. Is that something you're going to be able to do if you're on my staff?” (An aide to Pence denied this account.)

Trump does not always reciprocate this respect. Around the White House, he has been known to make fun of Pence for his religiosity. As Mayer reported in *The New Yorker*, he has greeted guests who recently met with Pence by asking, “Did Mike make you pray?” During a conversation with a legal scholar about gay rights, Trump gestured toward his vice president and joked, “Don't ask that guy—he wants to hang them all!”

“It's not a matter of when Republicans are ready to turn on Trump. It's about when they decide they're

When I asked Marc Short, who now serves as the White House director of legislative affairs, about these exchanges, he dismissed them as good-natured razzing between friends. “I think it’s fun for him to tease Mike,” Short told me, “but at the same time, the president respects him.” Not everyone is so sure. When it was reported last January that the Pences would be moving some of their family pets—which include two cats, a rabbit, and a snake—into the Naval Observatory, Trump ridiculed the menagerie to his secretary, according to a longtime adviser. “He was embarrassed by it; he thought it was so low class,” says the adviser. “He thinks the Pences are yokels.”

Pence’s forbearance hasn’t always yielded concrete policy victories for the Christian right, a fact that was highlighted during a skirmish over religious freedom early in the Trump administration. Social conservatives had been lobbying the president to issue a sweeping executive order aimed at carving out protections for religious organizations and individuals opposed to same-sex marriage, premarital sex, abortion, and transgender rights. The proposed order was fairly radical, but proponents argued that it would strike a crucial blow against the militant secularists trying to drive the faithful out of the public square. At first, Pence’s office reportedly worked to build support for the executive order inside the White House—but the effort was torpedoed when a draft was leaked to *The Nation* magazine, which warned that signing it would “legalize discrimination.” There proceeded a noisy backlash from the left, and hasty backpedaling by the White House. By the time Trump got around to signing the order, several months later, it was dramatically watered down.

Conservatives blamed Ivanka Trump and Jared Kushner for gutting the order. But according to one Trump associate with knowledge of the debate, Pence barely put up a fight. The surrender infuriated Steve Bannon, who was then serving as the chief White House strategist. “Bannon wanted to fight for it,” says the Trump associate, “and he was really unimpressed that Pence wouldn’t do anything.” But perhaps Pence was playing the long game—weighing the risks of taking on Trump’s kids, and deciding to stand down in the interest of preserving his relationship with the president. Pence, after all, had his future to think about.

IN AN EMBATTLED White House, the question of the vice president’s ambition for higher office is radioactive. When *The New York Times* [reported](#) last summer that Pence appeared to be laying the groundwork for a 2020 presidential bid, he denied the “disgraceful and offensive” story with theatrical force. But Pence has shown that his next move is never far from his mind—and he’s hardly the only one weighing the possibilities. One senior GOP Senate aide told me that pundits miss the point when they speculate about what kind of scandal it would take for the president to face a serious defection from lawmakers of his own party. “It’s not a matter of when Republicans are ready to turn on Trump,” the aide said. “It’s about when they decide they’re ready for President Pence.”

What would a Pence presidency look like? To a conservative evangelical, it could mean a glorious return to the Christian values upon which America was founded. To a secular liberal, it might look more like a descent into the dystopia of *The Handmaid’s Tale*. Already, in some quarters on the left, it has become

even more “dangerous” president than Trump. He has been branded a “theocrat” and a “Christian supremacist.”

There is, of course, nothing inherently scary or disqualifying about an elected leader who seeks wisdom in scripture and solace in prayer. What critics should worry about is not that Pence believes in God, but that he seems so certain God believes in him. What happens when manifest destiny replaces humility, and the line between faith and hubris blurs? What unseemly compromises get made? What means become tolerable in pursuit of an end?

On the night of May 3, 2017, members of the president’s evangelical advisory board arrived for a private dinner at the White House. They were scheduled to appear the next day in the Rose Garden to cheer Trump on as he signed an executive order most of them considered a disappointment. Instead of creating the far-reaching protections for believers that they had been hoping for, Trump’s order merely made it easier for pastors to voice political opinions from the pulpit—a conspicuously self-serving take on religious freedom. Some social conservatives were already voicing their discontent. Ryan Anderson, a scholar at the Heritage Foundation, called the order “woefully inadequate”; David French, a writer for *National Review*, dismissed it as a “sop to the gullible.”

But inside the West Wing, the president’s faith advisers were getting the full Trump experience. After dining on shrimp scampi and braised short ribs in the Blue Room, they were treated to a tour of the private residence. Trump led them onto the Truman Balcony, and waved off Secret Service agents who tried to stop them from taking pictures. The faith leaders pulled out their smartphones and snapped selfies, intoxicated by the VIP treatment. “Mr. President,” Robert Jeffress, the pastor of the First Baptist Church in Dallas, said at one point, “we’re going to be your most loyal friends. We’re going to be your enthusiastic supporters. And we thank God every day that you’re the president of the United States.”

For many of the attendees, though, the most memorable moment came when Pence stood to speak. “I’ve been with [Trump] alone in the room when the decisions are made. He and I have prayed together,” Pence said. “This is somebody who shares our views, shares our values, shares our beliefs.” Pence didn’t waste time touting his own credentials. With this crowd, he didn’t need to. Instead, as always, he lavished praise on the president.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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