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From Appalachia to the US aristocracy: JD Vance's elite transformation

The controversial senator's meteoric rise shows us how the ruling class and its media will always reward those who repackage working-class struggles as personal failings, writes ZOLTAN ZIGEDY



THE COMMON TOUCH: Vance poses for photos with kitchen staff in a Minnesota diner, July 28

WHAT explains the meteoric rise of a little-known principal at an investment firm to one of the youngest, least politically experienced vice-presidential candidates in US history? How did Senator JD Vance rise from relative obscurity in 2016 to become the current running mate to Donald Trump?

Simple: grovelling service to the ruling class.

In 2016, Vance published a book describing his youthful hardships growing up in the Midwest, the Rust Belt, or Appalachia, depending on what you choose to call the vast lands impoverished by corporate deindustrialisation in the late 20th century. The social, political, and economic disruptions that ensued affected millions of industrial workers and their families.

paying jobs, poverty, crime, drug and alcohol addiction, broken homes, unhealthy lifestyles, and a host of other tragedies associated with economic dislocations.

Vance was one of the few who escaped this fate, joining the Marine Corps after high school and using the tuition benefits from military service to attend and graduate from Ohio State University and pursue a law degree from Yale. Soon, he felt the need to tell the public of “the anger and frustration of the white working class” and satisfy his hunger to “have someone tell their story.”

But the story was not one that we might expect or hope for. Vance did not offer sympathy to the victims of corporate policy and political neglect; Vance did not call for help to those left unemployed, desperate, or without options; Vance did not plead their case to those dismissive of their despair.

Instead, he offered his own Horatio Alger, pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps “success” story, urging the losers to take responsibility for their own choices. “Those of us who weren’t given every advantage can make better choices, and those choices do have the power to affect our lives ... ”

The long-standing myths of self-help and individual initiative so beloved by those born into wealth find confirmation with Vance’s book, *Hillbilly Elegy*. Consequently, the book became a darling of

I wrote in 2016: “Nothing reveals the distance of the upper classes from the realities of working-class life like the current media fascination with the book *Hillbilly Elegy* by JD Vance. Writing as one of their own, JD Vance ... relates his unhappy working-class childhood to book-club liberals and country-club conservatives..”

In 2016, it was remarkable that Vance’s account appealed to the elites — the upper economic strata — whether they otherwise counted as liberal or conservative.

Of course, the book allowed a peek into the world of Hillary Clinton’s “deplorables,” satisfying the voyeuristic urges of the elite. But more importantly, Vance’s advance from an abused “hillbilly” youth to the higher rungs of finance capital bolstered the ethos that anyone and everyone can make it in the land of opportunity.

It was a message that both Democratic and Republican leaders and pundits like to hear. The New York Times lauded the book as a key to understanding Trump’s presidential victory, and Vance was “the voice of the Rust Belt” to the Washington Post.

As I wrote in 2020: “Vance’s book came out at a convenient time — 2016 — when East and West Coast elites sought explanations for Donald Trump’s success in the Midwest. The corporate Democrats had long taken these Midwesterners for granted, Obama calling them gun-toting religious zealots and Hillary Clinton famously describing them as “deplorables.”

the grit to escape the working-class ghetto of Middletown, Ohio and parlay an elite law school degree into the riches of high finance.”

While Vance earned a place on the talk-show circuit and a calling as a cable TV expert, it wasn't until 2020 that his national political career got a boost. Director Ron Howard — a master of feel-good movies — brought *Hillbilly Elegy* to the silver screen and to Netflix.

Reaching a much broader audience with his success-in-the-face-of-adversity tale, Vance was ready to pick a party and run for office. He chose the Republican Party, influenced primarily by wealthy donors, but through no great ideological commitment.

Indeed, during the years of Trump's political prominence, Vance frequently expressed scathing public criticisms of Trump and Trumpism, only to join his ticket in 2024.

For a dedicated servant of wealth and power, consistency is no obstacle. Vance can pose as the spokesperson for neglected white workers at one moment while carrying water for ruthless capitalist billionaires like Peter Thiel and Marc Andreessen at another. He can be the darling of patronising liberals when called on while serving Donald Trump's political machine when invited.

In that regard, he has a Democratic counterpart in Senator John Fetterman, who — like Vance — opportunistically pushed himself onto the national political stage.

audience, and whose background earned a measure of street credibility, Fetterman came from privilege. Consequently, he had a more difficult journey to establish himself as a saviour of the forgotten or discarded. He chose to adopt a small, neglected, predominantly black, Rust Belt community on the outskirts of Pittsburgh as a personal experiment in elite colonisation.

Fetterman convinced a critical mass of liberals that this scion of Republican parents was a legitimate answer to the souls lost to deindustrialisation.

Taken in by his reverent deference to liberal social conventions, his “cool” trademarks of cargo shorts, hoodies, and tattoos, and his marijuana radicalism, he was quickly elevated to the status of a progressive icon, a fearless defender of the little people.

All this was sheer nonsense to those of us living in his backyard, watching his careful cultivation of his political opportunities. Today, after a swift rise to the US Senate, Fetterman eagerly renounces his “progressivism,” embraces Israeli genocide, and constructs a safe, centrist image.

The ruling class needs the Vances and Fettermans to benignly explain the anger and despair of those bulldozed by deindustrialisation. They serve as a buffer between wealth and power, and the unruly masses.

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More than 50 years ago, the ruling class sought similar interpreters and explainers of justifiable black rage. Patronising white intellectuals sprang up with comforting analyses and for-hire solutions (think Robin DiAngelo, more recently, in the Black Lives Matter moment), and many ambitious African Americans eagerly brought their political aspirations forward to dilute the rage and redirect the energy into the two-party charade. Then, as now, serving the ruling class pays off handsomely.

Vance, like Fetterman, exemplifies the current breed of bourgeois politicians of both parties, totally devoid of principles and unabashedly pledged to the service of the ruling class.

Zoltan Zigedy is a US-based writer who blogs at zzs-blg.blogspot.com.

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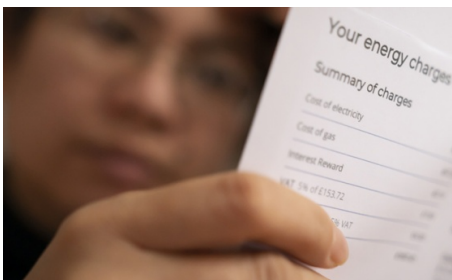
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