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Putting a New Face On Conservatism

Ind. Lawmaker Favors Polite Debate

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In a former life, Rep. Mike Pence (R-Ind.) liked to describe himself as Rush Limbaugh on decaf.

The phrase was verbal shorthand that the future congressman developed to explain his regional Indiana radio talk show, in which he delivered conservative political opinions with the even tones and polite demeanor of his Midwest upbringing.

"I occasionally got called the Rush Limbaugh of Indiana, but most people knew that my style was different," Pence said in an interview at his Capitol Hill office. "I'd tell people, 'I'm a Christian, a conservative and a Republican, in that order.' And my Christianity, first and foremost, governed the way that I tried to deal with people."

These days Pence, 45, elected to his third term last fall, is leading the charge for conservative principles on Capitol Hill instead of merely talking about them on the air. The beginning of the 109th Congress in January marked the start of Pence's tenure as head of the Republican Study Committee, a group of more than 100 of Congress's most conservative lawmakers. According to the group's Web site, members are dedicated to limiting the power of the federal government, building national defense, protecting private property rights and preserving "traditional family values."

It is a good time to be a Republican in Washington. The GOP controls both houses of Congress, and President Bush, the party's standard-bearer, has just begun his second term in the White House. Conservative Republicans, in the past relegated to the background while their party tacked toward the political center in national elections, see their best opportunity in years to put their public policy priorities into practice -- and law.

But even life at the top has its pitfalls.

Political analysts will be watching closely in this Congress to see whether Republicans, having vanquished Democrats at the ballot box, can maintain party unity and remain loyal to the president despite serious differences among the White House, GOP conservatives and moderates on some matters. Issues to watch include the fate of proposed new tax cuts; the president's desire to ease restrictions on undocumented immigrants; and conservative concerns about a rising deficit that they fear is increasingly making the GOP's oft-stated belief in limited government look out of date.

Also, Pence and the GOP must bear the weight of heavy expectations among conservatives nationally who, after years of fighting in the political trenches, now expect the Republicans to convert much of their agenda into law.

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Pence said he and his colleagues will fight to enact more tax cuts, pass spending curbs on entitlement programs such as Medicaid, impose new restrictions on abortion, get more conservative judges on the federal bench and increase the role of religion in public life.

"The fundamental goal of the 109th Congress should be to reassert the ideals of limited government and fiscal discipline that the American people elect Republican Congresses to do," Pence said.

Many in the conservative movement say the youthful-looking, silver-haired evangelical Christian from Columbus, Ind., is the right politician to carry their message.

Pence, whose wife and three children live with him in Arlington when Congress is in session, has a calm, resonant voice and a manner that suggests he would rather talk about his ideas over lunch with you than bellow them to a crowd from a soapbox. After losing congressional races in 1988 and 1990, Pence penned an essay titled "Confessions of a Negative Campaigner," in which he apologized for attacking his opponent in ads rather than explaining his own agenda better.

His conservative colleagues unanimously elected him last year to lead the Study Committee, which could play a pivotal legislative role in a closely divided House that has 232 Republicans, 202 Democrats and one independent.

"Mike is charismatic. He's articulate, but he's not shrill or mean the way some conservatives can be," said Stephen Moore, former president of the Club for Growth, a conservative political action committee. "I think a lot of us are looking around and saying, 'Who is the next great conservative hero? Where is the next Ronald Reagan in our party?' . . . The Study Committee has close to 100 members now. That's a high water mark. So it means that all legislation that passes Congress is going to have go through Mike Pence."

Democrat Melina "Mel" Fox, who lost to Pence in the last two congressional elections, told the Indianapolis Star last fall that Pence had paid too little attention to the needs of his district. In October, Fox was quoted by the Fort Wayne News-Sentinel in Indiana as saying that Pence "is really [House Majority Leader] Tom DeLay's voice out here. His agenda is the extreme right."

Pence has shown that he is not afraid to take unpopular stands. In the last Congress, he defied Bush, spearheading Republican opposition to the Medicare drug benefit that Bush wanted and speaking out against the president's signature education initiative, the No Child Left Behind Act.

"I was concerned that the ship of conservative governance was veering off course into the dangerous uncharted waters of big government Republicanism," Pence said.

Although Pence lost those battles, he has not given up. Before the current legislative session began, he vowed to try to roll back the landmark education law, or at least stop it from being extended to the secondary school level. And he said that the government should apply a means test to Medicare drug benefits, limiting the program to those in financial straits, so that costs remain under control.

On Social Security, Pence said he favors Bush's idea of creating personal accounts that would allow younger workers to invest some of their tax contributions in exchange for a smaller guaranteed benefit. He would not support raising taxes or increasing the income level subject to Social Security payroll taxes to pay for transition costs that he acknowledges are in the neighborhood of \$1 trillion to \$2 trillion. Through a spokesman, Pence said he favors borrowing the money to cover the fiscal gap, saying the move would save money in the long run.

Pence also backs a constitutional amendment to ban abortion, saying he is against the procedure in all cases -- including rape and incest -- except when the life of the mother is at stake. He has co-authored legislation that he says would prevent the federal judiciary, including the Supreme Court, from ordering judges to remove the Ten Commandments or other "acknowledgment[s] of God" from their courtrooms, leaving such matters in the hands of state courts.

"The most secular, atheist historian on the planet would have to grant that the entire legal system of Western civilization pivots off those tablets," Pence said. "And so the idea that, whether it be in Alabama or elsewhere, that states or public officials can't acknowledge a God or acknowledge that list of principles without violating the Constitution, I think, is anti-historical. And I think it's offensive to most Americans."

Although Pence's new post may raise his profile nationally, it could be a drawback if he ever runs for statewide office in Indiana, whose two senators are Republican Richard G. Lugar and Democrat Evan Bayh, said Mike Edmondson, executive director of the Indiana Democratic Party.

"Hoosiers support bipartisan consensus," Edmondson said. "Overly partisan members don't really represent the normal mold of Indiana politicians. Most of our elected leaders are moderate and work towards bipartisan consensus either in Congress or the Senate or at the state level."

There is no question about where Pence stands on the issues, according to Rep. Sue Myrick (N.C.), his predecessor as leader of the Republican Study Committee.

"Mike is a true believer in the conservative cause," Myrick said in a statement. "I know that he will carry on the torch and will keep the RSC on the conservative path."

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