

He and the former president have much in common. And both disdain Republicans.



UNRULY REPUBLIC

JD Vance Is the GOP's Obama

"Now in 1984—just to date myself a little bit, don't hate me, one month before I was born — The Wall Street Journal, the voice of big business in the United States of America, proposed, and I quote, 'a five-word constitutional amendment: There shall be open borders.'" So remarked Vice President JD Vance last week in his hometown, Middletown, Ohio. "Now, they weren't joking, they weren't being tongue in cheek," he continued, "because if you look at what they tried to do over the next 40 years, they told you back then exactly what they were trying to do."

What he thinks "they" were trying to do, as you can probably guess, was replace American workers with low-wage foreigners. You would think that the proposal of a five-word constitutional amendment would recommend itself as a bit of a provocation, but Mr. Vance, whose strengths don't include a sense of humor, plainly doesn't care about the argument advanced by that 1984 editorial, which concerned Cold War-era immigration policy.

Anyway he, or the aide feeding him hooey about the Journal as "the voice of big business," wouldn't know or care that among the newspaper's most famous editorials is one from 1979 headlined "Down With Big Business." The curious may wish to consult an update, "Down With Big Business, Again," published in 2021.

Mr. Vance's propensity to caricature arguments with which he disagrees puts me in mind of Barack Obama. In his first address to Congress, in 2009, the 44th president said: "I reject the view that says our problems will simply take care of themselves, that says government has no role in laying the foundation for our common prosperity." Over the next eight years Mr. Obama constantly rejected beliefs nobody held—"I reject the idea that we need to ask people to choose between their jobs and their safety," he said in 2011.

Ideological differences aside, the personas and careers of Messrs. Vance and Obama bear weird similarities. Both had tough upbringings marked by an absent father, intermittently absent mother and reliable grandparents. Both took an improbable journey, largely on the strength of smarts and industry, from broken home to the Ivy League—Mr. Obama to Columbia and, after a stint as a community organizer, to Harvard Law; Mr. Vance to Yale Law. Neither spent much time practicing law; Mr. Obama soon moved on to academia, Mr. Vance to venture capital.

Both wrote a powerful rags-to-riches memoir ("Dreams From My Father," "Hillbilly Elegy") and followed it with a pretentious, straw-man-laden campaign book ("The Audacity of Hope," "Communion"). Both served briefly in the U.S. Senate before catapulting to executive power, though Mr. Vance has yet to shed the "vice" in his job title.

I would have thought it all the stuff of parlor-game happenstance, but events of this summer tempt me to regard the two men as expressions of a type. I refer of course to Mr. Vance's conviction that he, by the force of his personality, could turn Iran's bloodthirsty, mendacious revolutionaries into practical men, ready to negotiate in good faith. In June, pursuing what became

the short-lived memorandum of understanding, the vice president repeatedly described his and his colleagues' efforts to bring reason to the U.S.-Iran relationship as though the idea were original. "For 47 years, this country has been a thorn in our side," Mr. Vance said to Jake Tapper in June. "The coolest thing about the progress we've made over the last few weeks is that you see people within the Iranian system—senior leadership, even IRGC officials—say, 'You know what? We may have some animosity, we may have some mistrust, but we recognize the way we've done business with the United States for the last 47

years is a mistake. Let's try something else.' ” It's true that President Trump has said similar things, though only a fool would take those statements as sincere. Mr. Vance spoke his lines with conviction.

Mr. Vance likes to tout his youth (“don’t hate me”), but he was old enough to follow the news in the 2010s as Mr. Obama attempted to turn U.S. policy away from Israel and draw Iran into the community of peaceable nations. Mr. Obama, too, liked to contrast his practical and interestbased approach to that of his ideology-driven predecessors.

With few exceptions, though, Mr. Obama limited his scoldings to members and administrations of the other party. At the core of Mr. Vance’s message is the repudiation of views allegedly held by both parties, especially his own. In Brewer, Maine, this week, the vice president described that bipartisan “consensus” again, though the caricature has a conspicuously Republican shape to it. What places like Brewer “really needed, they told us”—no prizes for guessing who “they” were—“was just to juice the short-term profits of a few big corporations, that we needed to open that border and prioritize foreign workers over our own citizens. They would cheer on the corporate raiders as they slashed headcount and shifted all those businesses either to foreign countries or brought in illegal aliens to employ.”

Leave the policy argument, if you can call it that, to one side. The lines reveal a man so contemptuous of views different from his own that he can’t be bothered to understand them. Now ponder a future GOP headed by such a person. Mr. Obama at least respected the party he led.

By Barton Swaim

The following is a digital replica of content from the print newspaper and is intended for the personal use of our members. For commercial reproduction or distribution of Dow Jones printed content, contact: Dow Jones Reprints & Licensing at (800) 843-0008 or visit djreprints.com.
