THE PRESIDENT'S CHOICE · THE SECOND TERM · BOOK ONE

JD Vance

President Trump's Partner

The Rise, the Record, and the Mind of the Vice President Who Serves the Trump Agenda

by Robert Miller

Free Sample · A Note on Sources and Method, Prologue, Introduction, and Chapter One

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A Note on Sources and Method

This book is an appreciative account of the life and public service of James David Vance, the 50th Vice President of the United States. It is written from a clear point of view: that Vance's rise is a remarkable American story, and that his work alongside President Donald J. Trump has been substantial and consequential. It does not try to be a neutral history of the Trump administration, and it does not set out to catalogue criticisms of the Vice President, which are widely available elsewhere.

That said, the book has one firm rule: everything stated as fact here must be true. The events, dates, votes, offices and achievements described are drawn from the public record, including Senate roll calls, White House statements, court and government documents, and reporting by major news organizations. Where a number comes from the administration itself, such as the totals reported by the Task Force to Eliminate Fraud, the text says so, so that readers know where the figure comes from. Where the Vice President's own words are quoted, the quotations are kept short and come from public remarks. The author's interpretations, such as judgments about Vance's intellect, his effectiveness, or his importance to the administration, are offered as interpretations and are supported with the facts on which they rest.

The book follows Vance from his childhood in Middletown, Ohio, and Jackson, Kentucky, through the Marine Corps, Ohio State University, Yale Law School, the publication of Hillbilly Elegy, his career in business and investing, his return to faith, his election to the United States Senate, his selection as President Trump's running mate, and his service as Vice President through November 2026.

Prologue

Islamabad, April 2026

On the morning of Friday, April 10, 2026, the Vice President of the United States stood on the tarmac at Joint Base Andrews in Maryland, a few steps from the aircraft that would carry him halfway around the world. Behind him, the blue-and-white Boeing that flies under the call sign Air Force Two waited for departure. Ahead of him lay the most consequential assignment of his public life.

For six weeks, the United States had been at war with Iran. The conflict had begun in late February, when American and Israeli forces launched a major campaign against the Islamic Republic. It had closed the Strait of Hormuz, the narrow waterway through which a large share of the world's oil, natural gas and fertilizer passes, and had sent energy prices soaring around the world. Two days earlier, on April 8, Pakistan had helped broker a ceasefire between Washington and Tehran. Now the two sides were to meet face to face, in Islamabad, to see whether the ceasefire could become a lasting peace.

President Donald J. Trump had chosen his Vice President to lead the American delegation.

It was not the conventional choice. In most administrations, a negotiation of this magnitude would fall to the Secretary of State. But two weeks earlier, at a cabinet meeting on March 26, the President had made clear that JD Vance was working on the Iran negotiations with Steve Witkoff, the President's special envoy for peace missions, and Jared Kushner, the President's son-in-law, and had asked the Vice President to brief the cabinet. A White House official would later explain that the President had tasked Vance with the role from the outset, judging that his position as Vice President gave him the stature to bring the key players to the table.

The President had reasons for his choice. Vance was a Marine veteran of the Iraq War who had long argued that American power must be used wisely and that wars must have clear goals and clear ends. Reporting at the time indicated that he had counseled caution before the conflict began. Once the President decided, Vance had supported him. Now the President wanted him to help end it, on terms that would serve American interests.

Speaking to reporters before he boarded the plane, Vance warned Iran not to try to play the United States. The message was clear: the President wanted peace, but he would not be taken advantage of.

Then he climbed the stairs and the aircraft lifted off toward the east.

The talks in Islamabad on April 11 and 12 were the highest-level face-to-face meetings between American and Iranian officials in many years. At a news conference afterward, with Witkoff and Kushner at his side, Vance said that the United States held a strong position and that the President's goal was an Iran permanently transformed, without nuclear ambitions and no longer funding the militias that had spread violence across the Middle East.

Two months later, in mid-June, the two sides reached a preliminary agreement known as the Islamabad Memorandum of Understanding. On June 17, at the Palace of Versailles, President Trump signed it.

The man who boarded Air Force Two that April morning was forty-one years old. Twenty-three years earlier, he had been a teenager in Middletown, Ohio, a struggling steel town, being raised by his grandmother after a childhood marked by instability and addiction. Twenty-one years earlier, he had been a Marine corporal at Al Asad Air Base in Iraq. Seventeen years earlier, he had been finishing a college degree at Ohio State in record time. Ten years earlier, he had been a young lawyer whose first book, a memoir about his family, was about to be published. Four years earlier, he had been a first-time candidate for the United States Senate, running behind his rivals in the polls until Donald Trump endorsed him.

This is the story of how that young man came to be standing on that tarmac, and of the President who sent him there.

Introduction

Why JD Vance Matters

On January 20, 2025, a forty-year-old man who had grown up in a struggling steel town in southwestern Ohio raised his right hand in the Rotunda of the United States Capitol and swore to support and defend the Constitution as Vice President of the United States. Justice Brett Kavanaugh gave the oath. Beside James David Vance stood his wife, Usha, a daughter of Indian immigrants whom he had met at Yale Law School, and their three young children. A few minutes later Donald J. Trump took the presidential oath for the second time, completing one of the most remarkable political comebacks in American history.

For President Trump, the moment marked a return. For Vance, it was the high point, so far, of a climb that few American public figures have matched. Twenty years earlier he had been a Marine corporal serving in Iraq. Fifteen years earlier he had been a student at Ohio State, finishing a four-year degree in about two years while holding down jobs. Ten years earlier he had been a young lawyer and an unknown writer working on a memoir about his family. Barely more than two years before the inauguration, he had won his first election of any kind, a seat in the United States Senate.

This book tells that story, and it argues that Vance's importance goes well beyond the speed of his rise. He matters for three reasons.

First, he is an unusually capable public servant. Vance arrived in national office with a mix of experience that is rare in American politics: military service in a war zone, an elite legal education, a bestselling book, and a decade in business and venture investing. He has used every part of that background as Vice President. His time in the Senate let him work the chamber on the President's behalf, helping move contested nominees and casting tie-breaking votes on

the President's top legislative priorities. His skill as a writer and speaker made him one of the administration's most effective explainers, at home and abroad. His business experience prepared him to lead a government-wide effort against fraud in federal benefit programs. When President Trump needed someone to lead face-to-face negotiations to end a war with Iran, he chose his Vice President.

Second, he is a serious thinker. Vance is known for reading widely, for engaging with ideas from political philosophy, theology and economics, and for being able to explain them clearly. He graduated summa cum laude from Ohio State and earned his law degree at Yale. He has written two books entirely on his own, one of which became one of the most discussed nonfiction works of its decade. In long interviews, in debate, and in hostile settings he has shown a command of detail and an ability to think on his feet that even his opponents have acknowledged. A full chapter of this book looks at that intellect: where it came from, how it works, and why it matters for the country.

Third, he speaks for people who were too often left out. Hillbilly Elegy explained the frustrations of working-class Americans in Appalachia and the industrial Midwest at the moment those frustrations were reshaping American politics. As a senator, Vance focused on the communities he knew: towns that had lost factories, families hurt by the opioid epidemic, workers worried about trade and wages. As Vice President he has carried that focus into the administration, from defending tax relief for tipped and overtime workers to arguing that new technologies such as artificial intelligence should make American workers more productive rather than replace them.

Above all, this is a book about a partnership in which President Trump leads. Every major assignment described in these pages began with a decision by the President. It was Donald Trump who chose Vance as his running mate in July 2024, over several experienced alternatives. It was Trump who built the coalition that

carried all seven battleground states that November. It was Trump who set the agenda of the second term: tax relief, border security, an end to costly foreign wars, a revival of American manufacturing, and accountability for how taxpayer dollars are spent. It was Trump who sent Vance to Munich, to Paris, to India and to Israel; who put him in charge of the Task Force to Eliminate Fraud; and who chose him to lead the American delegation in the Iran negotiations. Vance's achievements are real, but they are achievements in carrying out the President's agenda. Understanding Vance means understanding the leader who chose him and gave him his work.

The two men did not begin as allies. In 2016 Vance was openly skeptical of Trump, and he has spoken candidly since then about why his view changed. He came to believe that Trump had grasped something about the country that much of the political class had missed, and that Trump's policies on trade, immigration and foreign affairs were good for the people Vance had grown up with. That change of mind is part of what makes the partnership credible. Vance did not inherit his loyalty; he reached it by reasoning through the evidence, and he has explained his reasoning in public.

The chapters that follow are arranged in six parts. Part One traces Vance's formation, from his grandparents' hollow in eastern Kentucky to the Marine Corps, Ohio State, Yale, the publication of Hillbilly Elegy, his business career, and his conversion to Catholicism. Part Two covers the America First movement that President Trump built and Vance's path into it: the realignment of Ohio and the Rust Belt, the 2022 Senate race, his work in the Senate, his selection as the President's running mate, and the 2024 election. Part Three, the heart of the book, covers his vice presidency at home: the President's leadership, the cabinet confirmations, the One Big Beautiful Bill Act, the tie-breaking votes, the campaign against waste and fraud, the border, the economy, energy, technology, free speech and families. Part Four follows the Vice President on the world stage, from Munich and Paris to India, the Vatican, Greenland, Israel and the negotiations

with Iran. Part Five covers the friendship, grief and faith that marked these years, and reviews 2025 and 2026 month by month. Part Six steps back to consider the man himself and the office he holds: his intellect, his speeches, his family, his military service, the history of the vice presidency, and the lessons of the Trump-Vance partnership.

Readers will notice that President Trump appears on nearly every page of this book. That is deliberate, and it is accurate. A biography of a Vice President that treated him as an independent actor would misunderstand the office and misrepresent the record. Vance's influence flows from the President's trust. His assignments come from the President's decisions. His most important votes were cast for the President's legislation and the President's nominees. His diplomacy carried the President's messages and pursued the President's goals. Telling Vance's story honestly therefore means telling it as the story of a partnership led by Donald Trump.

That partnership also says something about the President's own leadership. One of the marks of a strong leader is the ability to recognize talent, to give talented people real responsibility, and to hold them to high standards. Throughout his career in business and in politics, Donald Trump has prided himself on choosing people and judging them by results. His choice of JD Vance, a young senator with a remarkable story and a first-rate mind, is one of the clearest examples of that judgment, and the record of the past two years is the best evidence of how well it has worked.

A word about what this book does not do. It does not claim that the Vice President has been right about everything, or that every policy of the administration has worked as intended. Public life does not work that way, and readers who want the full range of debate can find it easily. This book has a narrower purpose: to set down accurately, in one place, the record of what JD Vance has done and the qualities he has brought to his work. That record is substantial, and it deserves to be told.

Part One

Formation

Chapter One

Middletown and Jackson

Every American political career begins somewhere, and JD Vance's began in two places at once. One was Middletown, Ohio, a manufacturing city of about fifty thousand people between Cincinnati and Dayton, built on paper mills and on the great steelworks that the American Rolling Mill Company, later Armco, opened there in the early twentieth century. The other was Jackson, Kentucky, the seat of Breathitt County, a small town in the hills of eastern Kentucky where Vance's grandparents had grown up and where much of his extended family still lived. Middletown was where he went to school. Jackson was where, as he would later write, he felt most at home.

To understand Vance, and to understand why Donald Trump would one day see in him the right partner to carry the America First message into the industrial heartland, it helps to understand the history that joined those two places.

The Hillbilly Highway

In the decades after the Second World War, millions of people left the coal country and farm country of Appalachia for factory jobs in the cities of the Midwest. Families from eastern Kentucky, West Virginia and Tennessee moved north along the highways that came to be called, half in pride and half in mockery, the “hillbilly highway.” They went to Detroit and Akron, to Dayton and Hamilton, to Cincinnati and to Middletown. The jobs were hard but steady, the pay was good by the standards of the hills, and a man with a strong back and a willingness to work could buy a house, raise children, and expect that they would do better still.

Vance’s grandparents, James and Bonnie Vance, were part of that migration. Both came from Jackson. They married young and moved to Middletown, where James went to work at Armco. He would spend about four decades at the steel plant. Bonnie raised their children and, later, became the central figure in her grandson’s life. To JD they were Papaw and Mamaw, the Appalachian words for grandfather and grandmother, and the portrait he later drew of them, tough, profane, fiercely loyal, and determined that their grandchildren would have chances they had not, became one of the most memorable in modern American nonfiction.

The bargain that the Vances and families like them had made with industrial America worked for a generation. By the time JD was born, it was breaking down. Steel faced foreign competition and successive waves of restructuring. Factory towns across Ohio lost jobs. The social fabric that had held migrant families together, churches, extended kin, the shared culture of the hills, frayed in the cities. Middletown, like many towns in the industrial Midwest, saw its downtown hollow out and its population stagnate. These were exactly the communities President Trump would later speak to, and for, when he promised to bring back manufacturing and to put American workers first in trade policy. Vance grew up in the middle of the decline that Trump’s campaigns would name.

Childhood

James David Vance was born on August 2, 1984, in Middletown. He was born James Donald Bowman. His parents divorced when he was a toddler, and his mother remarried; for a time he went by the surname of his stepfather, Bob Hamel, who adopted him. Later, as a young man, he took the surname of the grandparents who raised him, Vance. The changes of name mirror the instability of his early life, which he would describe with unusual frankness in Hillbilly Elegy. His mother struggled for years with addiction. There was a series of father figures and frequent moves. There were periods of chaos at home that no child should have to manage.

What steadied him was his family's older generation. His grandparents' house was a refuge, and in his teenage years he went to live with Mamaw full time. She was strict about homework, unforgiving about bad company, and insistent that he could do something with his life. Vance has credited her more than anyone else with keeping him on track. His older sister, Lindsay, also looked after him, and he has spoken of her with deep gratitude.

Summers and holidays often meant Jackson. There, in the hollows of Breathitt County, young JD met the extended clan of great-aunts, great-uncles and cousins whose stories, loyalties and feuds shaped his sense of who he was. He came to see the hill culture as a source of both strength and difficulty: strength in its loyalty, its patriotism, its toughness and its faith; difficulty in a suspicion of outsiders, a fatalism about the future, and, in later decades, the spread of drug addiction and family breakdown. The ability to see both sides at once, to love a place and its people while describing its problems honestly, became one of the hallmarks of his writing and his politics.

School and Work

Vance attended Middletown High School and graduated in 2003. By his own account he was not a model student for much of his adolescence; the turmoil at home took its toll. What changed his trajectory was a combination of Mamaw's demands and his own growing determination. He worked part-time jobs, including at a local grocery store, where he watched the economics of a struggling town from the checkout lane: customers who paid with food stamps, the small daily signs of hardship, and the resentments they generated among neighbors who were also stretched thin. Those observations later found their way into his book and into his convictions about work, welfare, and the dignity of labor.

He considered college but did not feel ready. Instead, after high school, he made a decision that would shape the rest of his life. He joined the United States Marine Corps.

What Middletown Taught

It would be easy to treat Vance's childhood only as the dramatic backdrop to his later success. That would miss its most important legacy. Middletown and Jackson gave him three things that would later matter enormously to President Trump's political project.

The first was firsthand knowledge of the working class. When Vance talks about factory closures, the opioid epidemic, or the way trade deals affected manufacturing towns, he is not repeating talking points. He is describing his neighbors. That authenticity made him, from 2016 onward, one of the most persuasive interpreters of the voters who had turned to Donald Trump.

The second was an understanding of the limits of government programs. Vance saw welfare and public assistance up close, and he came away believing that money alone could not solve problems rooted in family breakdown, addiction and lost work. That view, which emphasizes work, family and community, lines up closely with

the administration's later efforts to restore work requirements, stop fraud in benefit programs, and focus federal spending on those truly eligible.

The third was patriotism. The hill people of Vance's childhood loved their country without reservation. They served in its wars, flew its flag, and felt deeply the slights of elites who looked down on them. When President Trump spoke of the "forgotten men and women" of America, he was speaking of people like Papaw and Mamaw. Their grandson would one day stand beside him as Vice President.

Vance returned to Middletown many times over the years. On August 21, 2026, as Vice President, he gave a speech at the Cleveland-Cliffs Middletown Works steel plant, the same plant where his grandfather had worked for nearly forty years, to make the case for President Trump's economic agenda. It was his first visit to his hometown as Vice President. The boy who had grown up in the shadow of the mill had come back to it as the second-highest official in the nation, sent there to speak for the President who had promised to revive towns like it.

CONTINUE READING

The President’s Choice

Portraits of the people who served
President Donald J. Trump.

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