

# President Pence: After the Assassination

Mark Mantel

A rumor floated about recently that Trump declined to give former Ambassador John Bolton a place in his cabinet because Mr Bolton wears a big mustache and Trump, it is said, heartily dislikes big mustaches. So, the first thing that must be said for Mr Pence, as he and Trump dismount and tie down their stallions together, is that he is not the sort of man ever to go and wear a mustache about town. He is not like that.

Indeed, Pence is essentially a virtuous man. He is well made, with a manly face, and possesses many innate excellences. He is good-natured, maintains an unostentatious dignity, and is knowledgeable. He also knows how to pretend to listen while preparing a riposte.

When it comes to lampoons, or even insults, Pence remains calm and patient, genuinely believing that quarrelsome factions ought to speak freely. And he is not quite a typical politician, either. There is a kind of high decency to him that allows him to break from the herd when necessary. There were even instances when Republican legislators overwhelmingly voted against Pence in Indiana – like when he vetoed a bill to retroactively impose a local tax in 2013. Yet not even his enemies deny that Pence always shows restraint and tact. Eager Rumor has few stories to tell of him. He did run a negative campaign once. But afterwards, he went and wrote an essay about how wrong it all was, and never acted badly again.

What is more, Pence always seems to have been this way. He was a thoughtful boy, by all accounts, and was well-liked by his classmates. Everyone was struck by his dutiful study and conduct. A model student, never missed classes, always arriving with homework

completed. Unless one happens to be a Plutarch, it is not even especially easy to write about such a man. In a way, the best criticism for him would be La Rochefoucauld's maxim that *he who lives without folly is not always so wise as he thinks*.

Pence was raised an American Catholic. He was an altar-boy. And once upon a time he even believed in the social gospel of the progressive wing of the Roman rite. His family were largely Irish Democrats, who worshipped John F Kennedy. Mr Pence still boasts of keeping a box in his garage filled with Kennedy memorabilia. Pence's people were generally the folks who backed Vatican II, wishing to purge the liturgy of its more sacerdotal aspects and ceremony. In America, after the French revolution, most of the Catholic bishops were cultured Frenchmen. They represented an aristocratic Catholicism not unlike your Archbishop Laud's, perhaps. But the Gallic wing was soon overthrown by Irish

immigrants, making things more extroverted, rebellious and plebian. The Pence clan sprang forth from this stylistic and ecclesiastical change.

However, at Hanover College, Pence became 'born again'. For a time, he still called himself Catholic, although by 1995, he and his family had joined an evangelical megachurch. There is no good way to translate these colossal gatherings, with their gigantic television screens and sentimental pop music, into terms that an Englishman could conceive. It may be true that nothing human can really be foreign to a man, but these florescent cathedrals cannot properly be called human. They teach a happy doctrine of worldly material success entirely alien to the Gospel or the Early Church. Probably all the enthusiasm began



back when wild Presbyterians Scots moved to the Appalachian frontier, warring against an episcopacy that did not exist in Kentucky or Tennessee, who thus needed to put their energies into something rather than nothing. Naturally, they also ‘went native’. Add modern gadgetry, along with a gargantuan stadium, and the result is a megachurch.

In 2013, Pence said his family was ‘kind of looking for a church’. And now, from what I can tell, he regards himself as ‘a born-again, evangelical Catholic’. It may also be difficult for a modern Englishman to picture what such a fusion might look like, but here one must admit the existence of scores of arguably comparable beings in the British Isles back in Cromwell’s time, for instance Milton in his pamphleteer days. These mixed forms seem indeed to sprout best on English-speaking soil, and there is no use England not sharing the collective guilt!

Yet what really gave Pence his shape is the Columbus, Indiana of a few decades back. His deeply conservative views on social issues from abortion to gay rights were crystallized by this pious town, with a church seemingly on every street. It was a perfect American village, religious and patriotic in the best sense, authentically celebrating the local over the national.

These days, Pence remains a man of place, a non-assuming Midwesterner. He is without airs, and lives quietly and devotedly with his wife and children. It used to be taken for granted, of course, that an American would be without airs. But nowadays pretensions of every kind have been so democratized that a man like Pence feels remarkably fresh. And his wife, Karen Pence, has a kindness that follows her like a perfume. She worked as a schoolteacher for 25 years. She is apparently passionate about art, with a sense of taste even, and paints watercolors of historical buildings in her free time.

Pence has three children. His boy is a marine, a fine son. His first daughter is a filmmaker and writer, penning, I’m told, a decent story about an American studying at Oxford. The other daughter is a progressive, still Pence has a profound and special affection for her. It should be mentioned that she votes for her dad, putting her fidelity to family before politics. Personally, I like this.

Still, in some ways, Pence is merely conventional, and not quite traditional in the best sense. For instance, he voted against the Dodd-Frank Wall Street Reform Act, *inter alia*, siding with Gudge against Hudge. Indeed, Pence seems to have no issue with a system of

sacking and sweating and endless toil. And I think the culprit is his megachurch, to be perfectly frank. These obnoxious amphitheaters teach very little about the centrality of leisure and contemplation to liberty, and that is the start of many American problems. The less sacerdotal the church, the less respect for a day of rest.

It is not realized, apparently, that the ‘deterioration of marriage and family’ and the ‘societal collapse’ that Pence speaks of is largely ignited by financial feudalism and unregulated markets. It is said, if I may, that Queen Anne of France visited prisons in disguise to bring comfort to tortured felons. I guess what I am getting at is that if Pence and his megachurch have any single great flaw, it is that no one there would think to visit a prison to give comfort to inmates. Materialism, philosophically and in the everyday sense, can never rise to the height of being human.

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Yet Pence has described himself as ‘a Christian, a conservative and a Republican, in that order’.

Last year, he stirred a national furore by signing legislation that allowed businesses to refuse to serve gays on religious grounds. He has also irritated progressives because he does not want gays in the military and has said that it weakens unit cohesion. And apparently, as he waits for his new Vice Presidential residence, living in Chevy Chase, Maryland, his neighbors have all put up large rainbow flags to welcome him. Ultimately, for Chevy Chase, Maryland to exist, a village like the old Columbus, Indiana cannot exist. And vice versa.

Finally, Pence does not support a nanny state, and in 2009 voted against the Family Smoking Prevention and Tobacco Control Act, which allows the FDA to regulate tobacco products. This too is unusual. Many of our conservatives, and all of our progressives, are confirmed prohibitionists. It is almost no longer possible, in our free society, for a quiet man to smoke a pipe in the park, to reflect on the day gone by. He is not allowed a moment to dream, to forget earthly cares, to watch a gentle whirl of smoke scatter in the stream of time. If Pence can preserve this one sanctuary of ancient liberty, he might have an honorable place in history. Even without a big mustache.

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