

Lunch with the FT **Life & Arts**

Hillbilly elegist JD Vance: 'The people calling the shots really screwed up'

The writer talks about elitism, the American underclass — and why his 'Mamaw' would have sympathised with Trump

Shawn Donnan FEBRUARY 2, 2018

The first rule of Lunch with the FT is that there must be lunch. So I am somewhat unnerved when I walk into Hadley's Bar + Kitchen, which JD Vance, hillbilly bard and venture capitalist, has nominated as the venue for a late lunch. Vance is already sitting in a booth with a colleague and his son. More importantly, he is diving enthusiastically into a mountain of french fries and chicken wings.

"Are you the guy from the FT?" he asks when he spots me, wiping his chin and standing up to shake hands. We exchange pleasantries, and I venture that we're supposed to be having lunch. He smiles, pleads hunger, and asks for a few more minutes to wrap things up. So I repair to the empty bar, where I study the menu and chat to a friendly bartender who is effusive about the restaurant's beer-battered avocado tacos.

Hadley's is emblematic of the sort of refashioned, Americana-laden eateries that you find increasingly in heartland cities such as Columbus, Ohio, where Vance is in the process of moving with his family. Think of it as a millennial-supervised remake of the American diner. The menu is heavy on reasonably priced burgers but loaded with urbanite flourishes ("Vegan Club Sandwich with heirloom tomatoes") and improbably named craft beers ("Barley's Blood Thirst"). Monday was "Vegan Monday". Today is "Taco Tuesday", and with \$3 tacos on offer, the bill looks like a bargain.

Before there was *Fire and Fury*, Michael Wolff's gossipy insider account of Donald Trump's first year in office, arguably the most talked-about work of the Trumpian era was *Hillbilly Elegy*, Vance's bestselling memoir of growing up in the heart of deindustrialised America. The book turned the 33-year-old into a national figure in the US, as the spokesman cum anthropological explainer for the downtrodden people of rural Appalachia — his family's ancestral home — and small-town, rust belt Ohio, where he was raised. In the countdown to Trump's election in November 2016, it was hailed as a handbook to the frustrations of the millions of voters in the white American underclass.

Vance depicts his family with deep affection, but *Hillbilly Elegy* also offers a clear-eyed critique of his clan's violent and dysfunctional ways. Vance gives an unforgiving portrait of his mother, who struggled with heroin addiction; in one terrifying incident when he was 12, she got behind the wheel in a drug-induced haze, and threatened to drive the car off the road and kill them both. And all morning I've been thinking of "Uncle Pet", the relative Vance introduces early in

his book by recounting the time he almost skinned a man with an electric saw for insulting his mother. I've also been mulling Vance's own frank confessions of his inherited Scots-Irish temper and his pugilistic social media persona and wondering what to brace for from this supposed whisperer of Trumpians.

The man who eventually sits down across from me has the conservative appearance of a politician from middle America — and behaves like one. He is wearing a dark grey suit and pressed blue shirt and tie. He is also studiously polite. If there is an inverse of the hillbilly stereotype, this is it.

The sober mien isn't accidental. Vance features heavily in Republican discussions in Ohio. He has twice explored and decided against a run for the US Senate in the past year, although senior Republicans pressed him to jump in. When he was first considering his options last summer, Vance tells me, he and his wife decided they "would be miserable" if he pursued it. "The more I thought about it, the more I thought, if I go ahead and do this, given where my family is right now, I'm actually a bad person."

Like so many Americans before him, Vance's escape route from poverty came via the military. He served in Iraq before going to Yale Law School and then completed a meteoric rise with a stint in Silicon Valley. As a rising star in venture capital circles, he worked for the entrepreneur and one-time outspoken Trump supporter Peter Thiel. There is a whiff of the metropolitan elite about his life today: he now travels the country giving speeches and working with investor Steve Case, the AOL co-founder.

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Yet we are meeting in Columbus, the capital of Ohio, because Vance has made a deliberate choice to move with his family to low-key middle America, far from the coastal metropolises most people with his qualifications choose to inhabit. Middletown, the former factory town where he was raised largely by his maternal grandmother ("Mamaw" to his readers), is less than two hours away by car.

Jackson, Kentucky, spiritual mountain home to the Vances, is four hours away. "I've basically been homesick ever since I left for [Marines] boot camp," he says. "It's always been this process of 'When do I go back?'"

Vance has bigger expectations for his return, too. If *Hillbilly Elegy* was about documenting the broken parts of America, his goal now is to find fixes. He has already established a non-profit to address issues raised by the [opioid crisis ravaging many communities](#). But the move to Columbus also looks like a bit of pragmatic branding. Much of his appeal, beyond his storytelling talents, lies in the intersection of several attributes: his sense of place; his loyalty to what before 2016 was often a forgotten demographic; and his status as a dedicated conservative who is

critical of both Trump and his Republican party as well as opposition Democrats. Without a move home, it's not hard to imagine Vance losing relevance.

We order: fish tacos for him and one of the same for me, paired with a deep-fried avocado taco. We pass on beer and both order Diet Cokes. Vance's criticism-for-all ethos has already prompted a backlash from the left and the right. The left-leaning New Republic has dubbed him a "false prophet" for the white working-class. Some Republicans in Ohio mock him in private for what they see as his naked political ambition.

The truth is that his politics are complicated. A year into Trump's presidency, Vance still has an ambivalent view of the man, melding awe and discomfort. "He is one of the few political leaders in America that recognises the frustration that exists in large parts of Ohio, Pennsylvania, eastern Kentucky and so forth," Vance says. He has been and remains critical of Trump's dog-whistle politics related to race and immigration. And he is sceptical about the president's long-term strategy. "The part that is forward-looking and answers the question 'What do we do now?' — it's just not there yet."

Vance is more scathing still when he discusses a broader Republican party that he sees as intellectually ossified. It cleared the way for Trump, he argues, by blindly pushing an agenda of Reaganesque trickle-down economics and engaging in misplaced military adventures in the years before the real estate developer's brash arrival.

"I wasn't as critical of my party in 2016 as I was the person," he says. "But when I look at tax reform, when I look at healthcare reform, I see Trump as the least worrisome part of the Republican party's problem, which is that we are basically living in the 1980s. We are constantly trying to resurrect domestic policies from the 1980s."

Such as? "Let's cut taxes for the wealthy! Let's cut the social safety net! . . . The fundamental thesis that underlined basic Republican policies in the early 1980s, which is right, is that you had an economy which was simultaneously stagnating and experiencing high inflation. I don't think the primary problem facing the American economy right now is that. It is that the opportunities that are out there require an adjustment in skills, an adjustment in training . . . And if that's the problem, I don't necessarily see how unleashing tax cuts for the wealthy . . ." Vance trails off as our food arrives. The tacos are small enough that I immediately order another.

In the end Vance did not vote for Trump. He voted for Evan McMullin, the conservative independent, instead. But he still has a charitable view of the man who has blown up the norms of American political discourse. That is partly because Vance believes that Trump's crudeness — and what he sees as the prudish response it elicits from city elites — was vital to the president's appeal in places such as Appalachia.

Mamaw would not have voted for Trump, had she been alive, because of his history as a philanderer. Yet “the vulgarity that turns a lot of people off, Mamaw would have appreciated and thought was hilarious”. His grandfather was a life-long Democrat, although he voted for Ronald Reagan in 1984. “I think, like a lot of folks, he would have voted against Hillary Clinton,” says Vance. “That sort of condescending elitism that the Clinton campaign came to represent would have turned my grandfather off.”

By this point I have bitten into my deep-fried avocado taco. While everything around it — the cabbage slaw and black bean and corn salsa — is delicious, the avocado itself is a flavourless mush.

The top-down condescension that he found so aggravating in 2016 remains alive and well in American politics, Vance argues. “The elite Republican view of why people voted for Donald Trump is that Trump voters are stupid. I think the elite Democratic view is that Trump people were bigoted and immoral. And that’s probably still very much reflected in popular culture,” he says, picking at his fish tacos.

I point out that based on his Ivy League résumé, profession and accomplished spouse — he met his wife Usha at Yale and she is currently clerking for the chief justice of the US Supreme Court — he has become a card-carrying member of the very elite he scorns. Vance laughs. “I react viscerally to this idea that I am a member of the elite, even though it’s objectively true.”

Becoming a father has made him consider this question more seriously. The arrival of his son helped him to reconcile with his now-clean mother, and Vance says he feels an urgent need to make sure his child understands his own impoverished roots.

Hadley’s Bar and Kitchen

**260 S 4th St, Columbus,
Ohio**

Fish taco x 4 \$12

Avocado taco x 1 \$3

Diet Coke x 2 Free

Oreo bonanza milkshake \$6

S’mores shake \$6

Total (inc tax and tip) \$37.11

“My greatest fear, within that context, is that, in 18 years, will [my son] feel more comfortable around our law school classmates — or will he feel more comfortable around people like my grandma? I want him to feel more comfortable around people like my grandma. But my intuition is that is going to take a lot of work,” Vance says.

In Sun Valley, Idaho, last summer with his wife and then four-week-old son for the annual Allen & Co media conference, he found himself perplexed by his luxurious surroundings. “There is this level of comfort that, I think, is completely weird,” he says. “I understood for the first time what the

Bible means when it talks about the difficulty of a rich man entering Heaven. It’s really tough to be a virtuous person when everyone is constantly taking care of you.”

Discomfort is also a theme when Vance talks about Silicon Valley. In the years that he lived there, he says, he found the relentless optimism jarring. “There are a lot of entrepreneurs [in Silicon Valley] developing the next app for clothes shopping who say, not ironically, that ‘we are changing the world’. You’re not changing the world. The guy that’s developing a new therapy that’s non-opioid analgesic pain relief? That guy’s changing the world. He’s going to save thousands of lives.”

His new life in Columbus is built around a belief that many of the entrepreneurs in cities in the American heartland don’t have the access to risk capital that they deserve. He works for Revolution, Steve Case’s venture capital firm, on a campaign called “Rise of the Rest” that is intended to fill the gap. Already he has found companies to invest in, like one in Indianapolis that makes cheap home tests to allow people to check for lead in their water. Vance also embraces wholeheartedly Case’s vision of a looming “third wave” of technological change that is more industrial and about “hard tech”. Much of that wave of innovation, he believes, will come out of America’s traditional industrial centres and universities rather than places such as Silicon Valley. His faith goes beyond the future of American industry. God is a growing theme in his personal life, too. He is in the process of converting to Catholicism and mulling a book on “Christianity and social capital”, which he describes as an exploration of the role of religious institutions in society viewed through his own personal story.

Just as he is explaining that, we are interrupted by our desserts. We have each ordered what turn out to be towering milkshakes, and we share a moment of awe when they arrive.

I’m curious about the future he sees for poor white Americans. Amid all the studies of rising mortality rates and a growing drug crisis fuelled by prescription opioids, isn’t he pessimistic?

“No,” he answers. “I’d say I’m a short-term realist, a long-term optimist. I do really believe in the power of identification and recognition. We’re in this period where everyone is starting to wake up, whether it’s because they know someone who has just had a heroin overdose or whether they are a policy expert and they have read this paper by [Nobel laureate] Angus Deaton [and his wife and fellow economist Anne Case] about dying in poor white America . . . That recognition gives me a lot of optimism.”

And what of America? His book is often grouped into a genre you might call “American decline” that covers predictions of everything from the end of the American dream to the crumbling of the postwar international order. “I do think that whatever is happening right now is really transformational and the postwar order is probably going to have to change in some fundamental way,” he says. “But I am still an optimist on that front. I think that my theory for what is happening is not that classical liberalism has failed. It’s not that western democracy has failed. It’s not that the postwar consensus has failed. It’s that the people who have been calling the shots for 20-30 years really screwed up.”

“So you’re still optimistic about America?” I ask.

“I am. I am. You just have to be. I don’t want to be one of those people who thinks the next 50 years are going to be a story of decline.”

That feels like a rare bit of optimism in a polarised America, I think as I pay the bill. In a country where vitriol rules, Vance is remarkably sanguine. America, he seems to be saying, will comfortably survive Donald Trump.

Shawn Donnan is the FT’s world trade editor

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