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Editorial: Mike Pence is a far better candidate than Donald Trump

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There is no way to redeem a presidential ticket that includes Donald Trump. Republican voters would have done better to elevate any of the other candidates who entered the race last year rather than nominate someone so flagrantly ill-suited to the most powerful job on Earth. But someone has to take the second spot on the worst of tickets, and Mike Pence is about as good a choice as Trump could have been expected to make.

The Indiana governor has a lot to recommend him. He's a principled conservative who understands and shares his party's ideals. He's a veteran legislator with a solid grasp of policy, based on 12 years in Congress and a stint as head of a conservative Indiana think tank.

Pence has been governor of Indiana since 2013, acquiring useful experience in the executive branch. He's a disciplined communicator who used to host a radio talk show. He exhibits a mature temperament fitting his self-description as "Rush Limbaugh on decaf."

These attributes add up to the one indispensable qualification in a vice presidential candidate: the capacity to step into the presidency if needed. Paul Ryan, Mitt Romney's 2012 running mate, met that standard. Sarah Palin, chosen by John McCain in 2008, did not. The problem with Pence's assets is that they starkly highlight the deep deficiencies of his running mate, who lacks almost everything useful that Pence embodies.

In choosing him, Trump had to overlook some major policy differences. Pence has been a consistent supporter of free trade. During his time in Congress, Pence pushed for a comprehensive immigration reform bill, which unfortunately failed. He repeatedly, though unsuccessfully, sponsored a "media shield" bill to protect journalists from being forced to identify sources in federal cases.

He was one of just four governors to earn an "A" on the 2014 Fiscal Report Card on America's Governors. Published by the libertarian Cato Institute, it said he "has been a champion tax cutter, and he has held the line on spending." On education, he has been a champion of vouchers and charter schools, as many conservatives are, but he also favors more public funding for preschool, something widely favored by liberals.

Pence is hardly beyond criticism. His endorsement of hard-line Texas right-winger Ted Cruz in the presidential primaries was unsurprising, given Pence's staunch support for socially conservative causes. He also acquitted himself poorly in the battle over the "religious freedom" bill he signed last year.

It sparked negative reactions from gay rights groups and corporations that said it would allow businesses to refuse service to people on the basis of their sexual orientation. After first resisting demands to amend the law, Pence signed a bill to forbid such discrimination. That retreat, however, suggests an ability to consider the possibility of his own fallibility — an ability Trump evidently doesn't have.

Pence's presence on the ticket doesn't come close to making a Trump victory palatable. But should that tribulation come to pass, at least the vice presidency will be in good hands.