

The New REPUBLIC

The Philosopher Prince

How Paul Ryan convinced Washington of his genius.

ALEC MacGILLIS / October 4, 2012

THE TALL, GOOD-LOOKING young man from Wisconsin sure was likable and energetic, but in the early 1990s, no one in Washington expected Paul Ryan to become the intellectual tribune of his party. It wasn't clear at first that he even wanted to be in D.C. Offered a position on Senator Bob Kasten's committee right after college, Ryan took awhile to respond because he was trying to find work as a ski instructor in Colorado instead. He only ended up going to Washington because his mom convinced him to, recalls Cesar Conda, the committee's minority staff director.

Ryan was inquisitive during his early days on the Hill, but in a way that was hard to distinguish from mere favor-currying. (He had been named the "biggest brown noser" of his high school class.) He nagged Conda, now Marco Rubio's chief of staff and a Ryan admirer, so often with questions about supply-side economics that Conda lent him two books to keep him busy—Jude Wanniski's *The Way the World Works* and George Gilder's *Wealth and Poverty*, both foundational tracts for trickle-down Reaganomics. "He was a regular guy—very personable, very friendly—not the sort of person you'd meet in the bowels of Heritage and Cato," Conda said, referring to the premier right-leaning think tanks.

At his next job, with the conservative organization Empower America, Ryan would chat up any senior staff member he could find, a pad in hand to jot things down. "He wanted a reading list from everyone," the organization's co-founder Bill Bennett told me. "He'd say, 'Where did you get that quote?' 'Where did you come up with that allusion?' 'What did you mean when you said that's a distinction without a difference?'" Still, for all of Ryan's drive, Bennett had no inkling of what lay ahead. "I saw an eager, hardworking, dedicated young guy," he said. "But I did not see a future superstar." In his spare time Ryan was working as a fitness instructor and waiting tables at a fratty Mexican restaurant on the Hill; he was generally indistinguishable from any of the city's hundreds of other clean-cut young strivers.

Until he wasn't. Now, Paul Ryan stands as the Republican Party's big thinker, its philosopher prince. He gives speeches at think tanks and universities on everything from the rule of law to foreign policy. His budget proposal, known simply as "the Ryan plan," cannot be challenged by Republicans without risk of blowback, and it has officially enshrined him as his party's go-to guy against

President Obama and his collectivist cohort. His omnipresence on cable television and in the conservative media—he has been mentioned 190 times in The Wall Street Journal opinion pages since 2008—has further burnished his reputation, to the point where William Kristol compared him to the late twentieth century's most notable policy intellectual on Capitol Hill, Daniel Patrick Moynihan. Even centrist deficit hawks and some left-leaning journalists and policy types have praised Ryan for his seriousness and honesty.

It's a hell of a metamorphosis: fitness coach to vice presidential candidate in less than 20 years. But those who worked closely with Ryan as a young man weren't really wrong to doubt him. He's not a Moynihan-style big thinker, never has been. Rather, he's a keen observer of Washington's evolving political culture who has become good—very good—at exploiting it.

PAUL RYAN LEFT Empower America and returned to Capitol Hill in early 1995, which was a particularly heady time for an ambitious 25-year-old conservative. The Republican Revolution was in full bloom: Newt Gingrich had just become speaker of the House, backed by a freshman class that was 73 people strong. Ryan found a job with one of the most promising of the new arrivals, Sam Brownback, and fell in with a group called the New Federalists, which was formed to push for cuts even deeper than those being sought by the Budget Committee chairman at the time. The New Federalists, Ryan recalled in a 2006 interview, "were the shock troops of the revolution."

Ryan clearly surrounded himself with the right people, but he also benefited from a big structural change that was taking place on the Hill. In 1995, Gingrich slashed committee staffs, creating an opening for members of congressmen's own offices to become more involved in policy-making than they previously would have been. Simply put, you didn't have to know as much to be influential. Ryan spotted his opening. "It used to be a closed-down system where the committee had all the staff and expertise, and this shifted powers to the members more broadly," said Matt Kibbe, who became friendly with Ryan while working on the staff of another House Republican.

The effects of the purge have lingered to this day, says Bruce Bartlett, a veteran of both the Reagan and first Bush administrations. After 1994, he explains, "the institutional knowledge about policy was gone, and it's never been replaced. And as a consequence, it's not that hard to do what Paul has done"—by which he means: build a reputation as a policy expert. The mystery is why others haven't caught on. "I've never understood why other backbenchers don't realize there's an opportunity for anyone who becomes credibly knowledgeable about some issue that people care about," he says.

Crucially, Ryan chose as his area of expertise the budget, an issue that was both broadly relevant to everything else going on in government and esoteric enough to scare off many others. Mark Neumann, who had come in with the class of '94 from Ryan's home district, says that Ryan had the wisdom to reject the advice

that Neumann had received from Washington elders-to lay claim to a narrow issue. "I remember people telling me to adopt a pet rock, and as long as the pet rock is taken care of, everything else will be okay," he says. Ryan's pet rock, the budget, was by contrast a huge slab foundation. "In those numbers are defense, Medicare, Social Security, the impact on his mother, my mother," Neumann says. "It's the idea of not adopting a pet rock-it's understanding the whole concept." When Neumann decided to run for the Senate in 1998, he urged Ryan to make a play for his House seat, dismissing Ryan's concerns about his age by calling him a "unique talent." "There are very few people who have the ability to understand the math in budgeting and the ability to articulate it," he told Ryan. "Those are two skills that don't often go together."

During the time when he was first studying the budget, Ryan was also firming up his ideological convictions-even if it meant moving in a different direction than his boss. Brownback had arrived on the Hill set on shrinking the government, but after a cancer scare, he gravitated more toward global causes such as human trafficking and African debt relief. Brownback, an eventual convert to Catholicism, started quoting a lot of C.S. Lewis; Ryan, according to Rob Wasinger, who was working under him at the time, was constantly citing a rather different writer. "I probably heard more about Ayn Rand than anything else in terms of his thinking on things," Wasinger says. "It was basically a lot of references to Atlas Shrugged and The Fountainhead." Meanwhile, Ryan was spending more time with like-minded libertarians at conservative organizations, particularly the Cato Institute, hiring staffers from its ranks and bandying tax-cutting proposals back and forth. This led to some sharp disagreements over priorities in Brownback's office, and Ryan's agenda eventually fell out of favor with his boss, who took more interest in issues that were distinctly un-Randian.

Still, by the time he became a congressman in 1999, Ryan had a command over domestic economic policy that was sorely lacking among many of his House colleagues. "This is someone who likes to read the underlying rules and regs of Medicare programs!" marveled Joseph Antos of the American Enterprise Institute. Far from hiding his penchant for going into the weeds, Ryan played it up, knowing that his relative wonkishness helped set him apart from other young congressmen. At Budget Committee hearings, Wasinger remembers seeing him "hustling around with his papers," still carrying himself like a diligent aide. And with his family back in Wisconsin (he married in 2000), he was known for working late into the night at his office and simply pulling out a cot when he was done.

It's not unreasonable to think that Ryan's reputation as a policy grind would be a negative in a party growing increasingly anti-government, but Ryan realized that it would have the opposite effect-yes, there were fewer Republicans who understood the workings of government in detail, but those who did were regarded with respect; they were the Cold Warriors who'd learned enough Russian to sneak behind enemy lines. The party had seen itself repeatedly trumped by the data-laden arguments of Bill Clinton and needed numbers men of

its own.

It also didn't hurt that he carried his geeky authority with decidedly un-geeklike personal charm, not to mention a trim physique and, as one person who served with him in Congress noted, an attractive wife. In Ryan's world, policy is macho. He's the kind of guy, Bill Bennett says, who likes to get together at night with Budget Committee actuaries, just to "get a few beers and talk numbers." Ryan and Bennett have gone on several long hikes in the Colorado Rockies together on which they've had free-ranging policy discussions, and Bennett raves of the congressman's mix of smarts and physicality: "Paul's an all-American guy. He's the fisherman, the hunter sitting alone in the tree. ... He's hunting something with a bow."

With that sort of aura, it's hardly shocking that Ryan maneuvered over several more senior colleagues to become the Budget Committee's ranking Republican after the 2006 election. Or that he claimed the chairmanship when Republicans won back the House four years later. By the time 2012 came around, Ryan's appeal to the party's elites was so strong that Mitt Romney couldn't possibly ignore it.

ONCE YOU EARN a reputation as a Serious Man in Washington, it's almost impossible to lose it. In January 2011, a trio of organizations that preach fiscal responsibility held a gala at the Newseum, D.C.'s gleaming shrine to the media. Alan Greenspan; Doug Elmendorf, the head of the Congressional Budget Office (CBO); and a bunch of lobbyists and political strategists shuffled in to witness the presentation of a new award, "the Fiscy," which, according to Concord Coalition president Robert Bixby, was intended to "provide some recognition and credit to those who have the guts to answer [questions about the debt] with something more than platitudes." One of the three inaugural recipients was Paul Ryan, who, Bixby announced, had "earned his Fiscy Award really by being the first [congressman] in several years to step forward with a specific scorable budget plan that would actually solve the nation's long-term structural deficits."

There were two problems with this. First, Ryan's plan, the "Roadmap for America's Future," wasn't truly "scorable"-he had instead simply given the CBO estimates for future revenue and spending, prompting the organization to note that its analysis "does not represent a cost estimate." The other problem was that, just a few weeks prior, but after the groups had decided to award a Fiscy to Ryan, he had rejected the recommendations of the Simpson-Bowles debt-reduction commission he had served on.

When I asked Bixby about this recently, he acknowledged that the juxtaposition was "awkward." "He could've given the entitlement reform effort a big boost and did not and that was a defining moment and not his best moment," he said. But Bixby did not regret the award: "It wasn't for his work on Simpson-Bowles. It was for another body of work. Like when a Nobel Prize is for a body of work from ten years ago." That body of work included Ryan's overall authority on the issue.

"He's very eloquent-he describes the nature of the debt and deficit problem very well," Bixby said. "If somebody's got a wealth of facts and figures at their fingertips and can recall them at a moment's notice, other people tend to defer to that. He knows all these numbers."

Bixby's leniency here is remarkable and can be explained by a cultural shift that has taken place in the capital. Simply put, Washington has seen its supply of people able to talk about government in substantive terms-who know "all these numbers"-dwindle over the last two decades or so. The press has shifted ever more into permanent campaign mode; congressmen spend ever more time raising money rather than digging deep into issues that interest them. The upshot is that Washington now finds itself highly susceptible to doe-eyed young men brandishing graphs. What these "wonks" propose doesn't even have to add up or be scorable, as the case may be with the Ryan budget, because people who lack much policy knowledge themselves regard those who have it with a reflexive awe-see the stud-with-a-spreadsheet halo that formed around Peter Orszag, the bespectacled former Obama administration budget director. And those who actually possess policy chops realize their singularity and seek comfort in each other's company, oftentimes across the ideological divide.

In recent years, Ryan has done a masterful job of charming members of the opposite party-another skill that has ingratiated him to the city's establishment. First came his partnership with Alice Rivlin, the former Clinton administration budget chief who served with him on the Simpson-Bowles commission. They bonded over their shared interest in overhauling Medicare with a "premium support" model in which seniors would buy private insurance coverage subsidized by the government. Rivlin told me she decided to work with Ryan because she found him "smart and knowledgeable" and "willing to negotiate." For Ryan, the upside was clear: as the National Journal noted, Rivlin's support "gave Ryan's plan a veneer of bipartisanship." When that alliance stalled over a disagreement on the details, Ryan quickly found a new Democratic partner for a revised version of premium support in Oregon Senator Ron Wyden. "There's a lot to work with here in terms of trying to find common ground," Wyden said at the time.

Meanwhile, Ryan was even managing to get a respectful hearing from liberal journalists. New York Times business columnist James B. Stewart suggested that Ryan's plan could serve as the "outline of a grand compromise." And there was Ryan's relationship with Ezra Klein, who runs the "Wonkblog" at The Washington Post. Klein presents himself as a numbers guy, a true empiricist, and in Ryan he felt he had found a kindred spirit. So in 2010, Klein ran three long interviews with Ryan in which the congressman was able to frame even his most radical budget solutions as mere wonkery-as if the only thing he and Klein disagreed on were the details of, say, just exactly how to rein in health care costs in the out-years, when they were in fact separated by a gulf in beliefs and priorities.

Klein then followed these transcripts up with a defense of Ryan against criticism from other liberals. One piece, headlined "THE VIRTUES OF RYAN'S 'ROADMAP,'" called Ryan's budget plans a "more honest entry into the debate" than what conservatives usually offered. Another laid out Klein's case for engaging with Ryan: "I don't think Ryan is a charlatan or a flim-flam artist. More to the point, I think he's playing an important role, and one I'm happy to try and help him play: The worlds of liberals and conservatives are increasingly closed loops. Very few politicians from one side are willing to seriously engage with the other side, particularly on substance ... The willingness to engage has made him look good."

Such approbation was a coup for Ryan-and a blow for Democrats confronting his challenge, suggests Jared Bernstein, a former Obama administration economic adviser. "The fact that those of us who were critical were lone voices initially has hurt," he said.

The embrace of Ryan as a well-intentioned member of the opposite party by people on the center-left was striking in light of what Ryan was, at the same time, telling audiences on the right. In speech after speech to conservative audiences, Ryan delivered an unflinchingly partisan view of the gridlocked debate over taxes and spending in terms that didn't so much evoke William F. Buckley as Bill O'Reilly. At a Wisconsin GOP meeting in May 2010: "The other side has ... different ideas. Their ideas are not the kinds of ideas that built this country. They're not the ideas that founded America." At the American Enterprise Institute in April 2011: "America is drawing perilously close to a tipping point that has the potential to curtail free enterprise, transform our government, and weaken our national identity in ways that may not be reversible."

The people who knew Ryan as a young man assured me that he wasn't just playing to the audience in those speeches-he was expressing an ideology that had remained strikingly unchanged since his arrival in Washington. "He's a true believer," says Conda Vin Weber, a Republican power broker who hired Ryan at Empower America, told me that "he's been remarkably consistent as he's advanced up the ladder-more consistent than anyone could have expected." Wasinger, who went on to become Brownback's chief of staff, says, "His philosophy is somewhat narrower than what you'd have with [other policy-minded politicians] of the past century," adding that "he always sees political objectives out there."

All of which is to say that Ryan is not some sort of high-minded intellectual, taking in the world's problems with an independence of mind and openness to new information. He is an ideologue with a politician's talent for sticking to party orthodoxy in the face of contrary evidence. "He has a real talent for staying on his talking points," says Earl Blumenauer, an Oregon Democrat who serves on the Budget Committee. "Most people would be distracted when someone points out, 'Gee, Paul, your budget takes all those purported savings and redistributes them [as tax cuts to the wealthy].' He has the ability to just repeat the talking point. ...

It's a gift."

And it's almost certainly one he developed while working within the conservative echo chamber. "The numbers he, quote, 'knows' are repeated with certitude and backed up by big megaphones," adds Blumenauer. "He was paid to do that for years; that was his job. And in a sense he's just gone from his apprenticeship into picking that up and running with it." What's significant is the extent to which this has succeeded for Ryan beyond the echo chamber. Through his repetition of budget numbers and deficit forecasts, he's managed to make a radical plan that would eviscerate the safety net and basic functions of government into something that's acceptable, even revelatory, to so many people in Washington who should know better.

"I've literally never heard or read anything from [Ryan] that's surprising or new," Barney Frank told me late this summer. So why the big-thinker reputation? "Because he is being graded on a curve with a bunch of guys who jump into the Sea of Galilee because they want to be closer to God."

IT SURELY HASN'T all been good news for Paul Ryan since Romney tapped him as his number two in early August. His speech at the Republican National Convention (RNC) in Tampa would've been a fine enough piece of oratory if it weren't so transparently hypocritical. In it, the congressman attacked Obama for cutting Medicare (Ryan had included the cuts in his own proposal), for not acting upon the report released by the Simpson-Bowles deficit commission (the same report Ryan had declined to support), and for allowing the debt-ceiling crisis to escalate (even though Ryan had a big hand in that).

Ryan was hammered by fact-checkers almost immediately. Even Fox News ran a piece on its website arguing that the speech "set the world record for the greatest number of blatant lies and misrepresentations slipped into a single political speech." The morning after Ryan's performance, Ezra Klein wrote on his blog-in the more-in-sadness-than-in-anger style that's so popular in Washington-that his engagement with Ryan was effectively defunct. "The Romney campaign isn't adhering to the minimum standards required for a real policy conversation," he said, adding, "I don't like that conclusion. It doesn't look 'fair' when you say that."

I talked to Klein shortly after the convention and asked whether he thought Ryan had used wonkery to cloak a rigid ideological agenda, partly by engaging with fellow policy geeks like himself. Klein demurred, saying that it should have been clear to everyone for some time now that Ryan is a "very, very ambitious politician who is also a very fluent policy wonk." He disputed the premise that he had given Ryan bipartisan cover at a crucial point in the congressman's career: "I don't think of the blog as making an argument for liberalism. At this point in my life, I don't really think of myself as a liberal. That's not the project I'm part of, which is to let the facts take me where they do. That's why I gave him better coverage when the numbers added up and less so when they didn't."

Alice Rivlin, another Democrat who had once been charmed by Ryan, was more restrained in her rebuke of him. When I called her up, she said there was "irresponsible" talk about Medicare "on both sides." I also asked her about Ryan's rejection of the Simpson-Bowles recommendations, to which she responded that he had at least voted for the eventual deal to avoid a debt-ceiling default. But hadn't he helped bring the country to that brink by undermining a "grand bargain" between Obama and John Boehner? "I don't know about that," she said. "There are lots of different stories about how close Boehner and the president came. Boehner clearly didn't have control of his caucus." Wasn't Ryan a big reason why he didn't have control of it, though? "I don't know."

Still, no amount of self-justification or evasion can paper over the fact that Ryan simply doesn't need his liberal enablers anymore. He used them to become a national star, which-inertia being what it is among the Washington press corps-means that it's going to take a lot more than a few fact-checks to cut into his reputation as a world-class intellect. Days after his speech, Diane Sawyer was still referring to Ryan as the "intellectual heart" of the conservative movement, and plenty of commentators continue to echo that sentiment.

"If you're talking about budget policy and you really understand baselines and growth, which he does," Jared Bernstein says, "you shouldn't understate the extent to which that vaults you into the front of the class. The fact that the numbers don't come close to adding up becomes a secondary factor. ... If you have a reputation as an early riser, you can sleep til noon."

Meanwhile, it's almost impossible to imagine Ryan losing favor among Republicans, even if he and Romney lose the election this fall. At the RNC, I attended an event that Empower America was holding in memory of its co-founder Jack Kemp. Cigar stubs (nice ones: CAO Flavours and Partagas) lay scattered on the dirt next to the discarded sticks of red, white, and blue Heritage Foundation popsicles. Speaker after speaker hailed Ryan's rise as proof that the organization had succeeded in its mission. It was the day after his much-maligned convention performance, but there was no mention of the policy contradictions or sleights of hand Ryan had adopted. "The selection of Paul Ryan has given a great momentum to thinkers on the center-right who want to win on the battleground of ideas, not just pursue politics for politics' sake," said Vin Weber, the group's former director, who is now advising Romney's campaign. Floyd Kvamme, the venture capitalist who chaired the organization, spoke of Ryan as if he were some sort of financial asset. "At Empower we invested in ideas and people, and look at the product of that investment," he said. "All of us should be extremely proud."

As I wound my way back to the main convention hall, I couldn't stop thinking about the disjunction between Ryan's speech and the event's encomiums to his intellect, so I gave Weber a call. He clearly wanted to see Ryan become president one day-was he worried that the candidate's reputation was being tarnished by some of his more dubious campaign rhetoric?

Weber scoffed at the question. "If you're serious about Washington policy," he said, "you can't take the position that we don't want you to act like a politician when you're running for vice president. That's not realistic. If you have that much demand for intellectual purity in your approach, you're in the wrong city-and the wrong line of work."

Weber's right, of course, and Paul Ryan has known it all along.