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Conservative Elite in Capital Pay Heed to Ryan as Thinker

[ANNIE LOWREY](#)

WASHINGTON — With the debate over the federal deficit roiling last year, David Smick, a financial market consultant, held a dinner for a bipartisan group of connected budget thinkers at his expansive home here.

At the table were members of the city's conservative policy elite, including [Alan Greenspan](#), the former chairman of the Federal Reserve, and [William Kristol](#), the editor of The Weekly Standard.

But that evening, none drew more attention than a relatively new member of that best-of class: Representative [Paul D. Ryan](#), Republican of Wisconsin and now Mitt Romney's running mate, who spoke passionately about the threat posed by the [national debt](#) and the radical actions needed to rein it in.

"I thought, 'This is the one guy in Washington paying attention,'" said Niall Ferguson, the Harvard economic historian and commentator, who spent some of the rest of that evening, along with Mr. Kristol, trying to persuade Mr. Ryan to run for president.

Much has been written about Mr. Ryan's intellectual influences: canonical conservative thinkers like Friedrich von Hayek, the Austrian economist, and [Ayn Rand](#), the novelist and philosopher. Mr. Ryan's enthusiasm for them [dates at least to](#) his days as a precocious undergraduate at Miami University in Ohio.

But since first coming to Washington in the early 1990s, Mr. Ryan has been closely tied to an intellectual world more concerned with the political agenda of low taxes, light regulations and small government than philosophical ruminations on work and freedom.

And since his emergence as the key Congressional Republican on the budget issue, Mr. Ryan has become a particular favorite of — and powerful influence on — the intellectuals, economists, writers and policy makers who are at the heart of Washington's conservative establishment.

Mr. Ryan "is the good think-tanker-as-politician," said Stuart Butler, the director of the Center for Policy Innovation at the Heritage Foundation, a right-of-center

research institution. “When I’m having a discussion with Ryan, I’m talking to someone who knows the material as well as, if not better than, I do.”

Mr. Kristol, who has been one of Mr. Ryan’s loudest boosters in Washington, said, “He’s a guy who, unlike 98 percent of members of Congress, can sit in a conference room or around the dinner table with 6 or 10 people from think tanks and magazines and more than hold his own in a discussion.”

Aides and confidants of Mr. Ryan describe him as an earnestly interested, tactically minded policy thinker, with a deep knowledge of budget numbers and close ties with the right’s influential policy heavies.

In his 20 years in Washington, Mr. Ryan has pursued ties with two groups of thinkers in particular: policy scholars at research groups like the American Enterprise Institute and commentators like Mr. Kristol and George F. Will of The Washington Post. The reputation for wonkiness is merited, people close to Mr. Ryan said. He goes home with a stack of white papers. He calls economists when he has questions about their budget projections or ideas.

He also athletically argues for his policy ideas among the city’s policy elite in the white-tablecloth lunches, Capitol Hill meetings, private dinners and retreats where consensus gets formed.

“He’s unusual,” Mr. Kristol said. “The only member of Congress I can remember like that is Pat Moynihan,” he said, referring to Senator [Daniel Patrick Moynihan](#), a New York Democrat who was known for his reaching intellect.

Early in his career, Mr. Ryan worked at a nonprofit advocacy group, Empower America, now part of FreedomWorks, after college and a brief stint on the Hill.

Two of its founders, William J. Bennett, the former education secretary and current talk radio host, and Jack Kemp, the former housing secretary and 1996 Republican vice-presidential candidate, became important mentors to Mr. Ryan. Mr. Kemp died in 2009.

Mr. Kemp “taught me that big ideas are the best politics,” Mr. Ryan [told National Review](#). “They will always be challenged, and they will sometimes be controversial, but you have to do what you think is right, what you’re passionate about, and be a strong advocate for it. If you do that, you can shift the debate in a major way.”

While Mr. Ryan is sometimes compared to Mr. Kemp because of their similar energetic and affable styles, Mr. Ryan’s bedrock belief in smaller government has sometimes placed him to the right of his mentors.

Mr. Kemp “wasn’t hostile to budget cuts, but he certainly wasn’t enthusiastic about them,” said Bruce Bartlett, a budget expert who worked on Mr. Kemp’s staff and has known Mr. Ryan for two decades. “Jack just never thought that was

important. He thought growth was important. He never proposed spending cuts to pay for tax cuts or anything like that.”

The embrace by conservative policy elites began after Mr. Ryan became a prominent voice pushing for [the privatization](#) of the [Social Security](#) system during the George W. Bush administration. Despite his lack of seniority — and in no small part because of his already firm reputation as an economic policy thinker — Mr. Ryan became the top Republican on the budget committee in 2007 and then its chairman when Republicans retook the House in 2010.

In 2008, he released the first iteration of his budget, the “Roadmap for America’s Future.” It won plaudits in a right-of-center policy world that had gotten used to politicians watering down its ideas and acquiescing to a bloated [federal budget](#) through the Bush years.

“Probably more than any other member of Congress, he says, ‘What if we really try to apply conservative principles, limited-government principles, to legislation? Let’s see how far we can get, given the political realities,’ ” said Michael F. Cannon, a health policy expert at the Cato Institute, who described Mr. Ryan as a contrast to other Republicans who are quick to abandon small-government proposals under pressure from industries or interest groups.

“He’s worried about much more than the budget arithmetic, about the kind of government that we are going to have in America,” said Yuval Levin of the Ethics and Public Policy Center here and a favored policy thinker of Mr. Ryan.

“He’s a politician, not an O.M.B. economist,” Mr. Levin said, referring to the Office of Management and Budget at the White House.