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Fast Rise Built With Discipline

By JENNIFER STEINHAUER and JONATHAN WEISMAN

WASHINGTON — In the early 1990s, Tortilla Coast, a popular Capitol Hill watering hole, was staffed by ambitious young men and women flinging Tex-Mex and margaritas at patrons whose jobs in the nearby House and Senate office buildings they not so secretly coveted.

One of those waiters, a tall, dark-haired Midwesterner named **Paul Ryan**, stood out to his boss and co-workers. He was the guy who always showed up for work on time, wore neatly pressed khakis and chatted about economic policy as he floated along in a kayak at an after-work party. While the other twentysomethings pounded beers after work, Mr. Ryan was known to stick to just a few.

“I think even then he probably had an eye toward his future,” said Scott Johnson, a waiter back then who was looking for work in the Clinton administration.

Mr. Ryan’s sense of purpose extended to the conservative research group where he was also working at the time, winning the sort of praise from Republican elders that would help pave his remarkably propitious path in Washington, where he has spent most of his adult life. From his first summer as a Senate intern, a position he got thanks in part to the libertarian economist who was his college mentor, Mr. Ryan made an impression with his discipline, his command of **supply-side economics** and his uncanny ability to develop relationships with like-minded conservatives.

“We were the beginnings of the network that he has now developed,” said former Senator Robert W. Kasten of Wisconsin, in whose office Mr. Ryan first worked as a college junior.

Winning the right supporters wherever he went, Mr. Ryan has risen rapidly in Washington, moving easily from lowly staff aide to 28-year-old congressman to

the Republicans' pre-eminent policy expert. His economic ideas, which once placed him outside his party's mainstream, have shaped the 2012 campaign debate. And on Wednesday night in Tampa, Fla., the policy wonk who through his political skills and disciplined focus defined the Republican agenda will, at age 42, accept its nomination for vice president.

"There are people in Washington who when you meet them you know they are headed for something big," said Brian Hart, who worked with Mr. Ryan in the office of Senator Sam Brownback of Kansas in the late 1990s. "That was Paul."

Born and raised in Janesville, Wis., where he still lives with his wife and three children, Paul Davis Ryan took an early interest in economics, according to family and friends. At Miami University in Ohio, he became enamored with conservative economists, and he came to realize that the best place to morph theory into policy was Washington.

"I don't think he really planned to go into politics at that point," Mr. Kasten said. "It was more how the policies could be implemented."

Cesar Conda, who was the Republican staff director for the Senate Small Business Committee, on which Mr. Kasten served as the ranking Republican, recalled an earnest young intern carrying the mail between Mr. Kasten's personal office and his committee office.

"Every chance he got, he'd take the opportunity to pop his head into my office to ask: What's Senator Kasten up to? What did I think about this economic policy or that economic policy? What about supply-side economics?" said Mr. Conda, who is now the chief of staff for Senator Marco Rubio of Florida.

A Return to the Capital

Mr. Ryan graduated in 1992 with a degree in political science and economics, and it was right back to Washington, this time on Mr. Kasten's staff.

The next year, while moonlighting at Tortilla Coast for extra cash, Mr. Ryan landed a job at Empower America, a research group run by two prominent conservatives — Jack Kemp, the former quarterback and congressman, and William J. Bennett, who had held high posts in the Reagan and Bush

administrations. It was a place where young conservatives, driven into the wilderness by the election of Bill Clinton, went flocking.

Mr. Ryan made an impression once again with his diligence and his intense embrace of supply-side economic theory. Also, he cheerfully did what he was told to do.

Peter Wehner, who hired Mr. Ryan, insisted that the assistants clip articles from the newspaper, copy them “neat and centered,” and present the clippings in a nice sheaf each morning. That task fell to Mr. Ryan, who was not the type to complain. “He never held it against me, and he should have,” Mr. Wehner said.

While at Empower America, Mr. Ryan did not miss an opportunity to network, Mr. Bennett said. Although Mr. Ryan was in the economic section, he went to talk to Mr. Bennett frequently, flattering him, until they became close, a relationship that continues to this day. “I remember he complimented me,” Mr. Bennett said, “saying I don’t try to demonize the other side. ‘How do you do that?’ ”

Mr. Ryan sat in the camp of energized outsiders. It was the tail end of the Reagan revolution, and pragmatism was in, not ideological fervor. Newt Gingrich was rising in the House, with his sharp partisan edge, but he had not yet emerged triumphant over the conciliatory old bulls like Robert H. Michel of Illinois, the House minority leader.

A. Mark Neuman, a longtime friend who met Mr. Ryan when he was at Empower America, said Mr. Ryan was just like most Capitol Hill denizens at that time. He lived in a group house with his buddies from college, “a dumpy place in a rough neighborhood furnished with the kind of stuff that people left on their curb,” Mr. Neuman said, where Mr. Ryan once barricaded the door at night with sofas after a crowbar break-in. They went out for drinks after work at places where they knew someone who could cut them deals on beer or waive the cover charge.

But Mr. Ryan never lost focus. He left the research group to work for Mr. Brownback, the Kansas conservative, who said in an interview that he resisted hiring Mr. Ryan as his legislative director because of his youth, but that Mr. Ryan won him over in part by proving that he had “the clear principles that I was looking for.”

An Opportunity Arises

With his mentors firmly in place, Mr. Ryan saw the chance that Congressional aides dream about. His hometown congressman, Mark Neumann, announced in 1998 that he was vacating his House seat to run for the Senate. Mr. Ryan, though he was only 28 and had lived outside the district for most of his post-college years, wasted no time. “Paul is disciplined,” said Mr. Neuman, his old friend. “It was like, ‘I gotta do this, I gotta put everything into it, I’ve gotta focus and do everything I need to do.’ An opportunity arose, and he grabbed it.”

Almost no one who worked with him anticipated the jump to electoral politics, but Mr. Bennett and Mr. Wehner said that it flowed naturally from the moment. The “country club” wing of the **Republican Party** was in eclipse. Mr. Kemp had been named his party’s vice-presidential nominee, and with the 1996 welfare overhaul, his ideas — and, by extension, Mr. Ryan’s — on conservative social policy were very much in vogue.

In the 1996 election, Mr. Brownback shocked the party with his primary victory over Bob Dole’s handpicked candidate for his Kansas Senate seat. As a college student, Mr. Ryan had put up yard signs for John A. Boehner’s first House campaign in Ohio in 1992. Now Mr. Boehner was a member of the Congressional leadership.

“It would have been hard for this idea not to go into his head,” Mr. Bennett said. “He had more than a taste of power. He was right in the kitchen.”

Mr. Ryan had his own explanation for his decision to jump from back-room work to candidate. “I learned how Washington does and does not work,” he said then. “You’ve got to go to Congress and stand up for your principles.”

Mr. Neumann had been a card-carrying Gingrich revolutionary, but he was also ahead of his time, a math teacher and a proto-**Tea Party** figure obsessed with the deficit and budget matters. His experience showed Mr. Ryan that such a focus appeared to work well with the electorate in his corner of southeastern Wisconsin, and he took up the Neumann mantle even as the congressman was losing in his Senate race against Russ Feingold, a liberal Democrat.

Still, the odds at first seemed long.

“Paul Ryan’s biggest problem was that he was a young single guy who had lived away from the district,” said Lydia Spottswood, the Democrat who ran against him.

A columnist for The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel openly mocked him. “Ryan, a high school senior, has apparently decided to run for national office as part of a school project or something,” the columnist wrote. “It’s an admirable message for the youth in our community. How did he raise the money anyway, selling lemonade? Although it’s almost laughable someone so young would think he actually has a chance to win.”

Mr. Ryan cheerfully pressed on, with the help of his brother Tobin and Tobin’s wife, who took leaves from their jobs to assist him. “He needed to create the impression he was deeply embedded in the district,” said Ms. Spottswood, who added that Mr. Ryan would often take his sister-in-law and her baby to factories during the early-morning shift changes to campaign. “Lots and lots of people were getting the impression that was his wife and his baby, and this was critical for him,” Ms. Spottswood said.

He also made advertisements in which he wore a hard hat, which left voters with “the impression of Paul that he was actively working in the construction trade and had a family and was older than he was,” she said.

“It was awesome to watch it,” she added. “It was like an acting job.”

While Mr. Ryan ran as the “paycheck protection” candidate, Ms. Spottswood said, the campaign focused more on other issues, like gun rights.

Both Mr. Kemp and Mr. Bennett stumped for him, and Gov. Tommy G. Thompson made calls to local political operatives promoting his candidacy.

“It was clear to me he’d worked for Sam Brownback, he’d worked with Bob Kasten, he’d worked with Jack Kemp, he was being groomed to come back up here when the time was right,” Ms. Spottswood said.

With Mr. Gingrich, by then the House speaker, breathing new life into an embattled party, and with the Monica Lewinsky scandal in the backdrop, the

timing was right indeed. It would be Mr. Ryan's first and only tough race, and he won with 57 percent of the vote.

A Particular Focus

He did not arrive in Congress as a superstar, but he did possess a skill that would make him one: a genuine interest in the **federal budget**.

The Budget Committee — unlike, say, the Ways and Means Committee — is no sexy landing place, and its terms are shorter. But Mr. Ryan made the most of his assignment. “When he first got there, he did his yeoman’s work as a backbencher,” said former Representative John M. Spratt Jr. of South Carolina, a Democrat who led the panel. “He mastered a lot of budget.”

He also used the committee’s hearing process to highlight the work of his conservative contacts. “He was very astute at building his base of support,” Mr. Spratt said, “particularly with groups that were some distance to the right. He was a very clever networker. When witnesses were called, it was always the Heritage Foundation or the Cato Institute.”

Whether Mr. Ryan helped galvanize the Tea Party with his tough-medicine budget ideas or simply rode its wave is a matter of debate. But there is no question that the rising concern over the deficit and the arrival in 2010 of 87 Republican freshmen who were loyal to Mr. Ryan’s ideas made him the intellectual leader of the House’s majority party.

“The first time I went to talk to him was about monetary policy the first week I was in Congress,” said Representative Trey Gowdy of South Carolina. “And I assumed because he is who he is, and is always busy with countless demands on his time, that it would be a short conversation. He had all the time I wanted or needed, gave me a book to read on it, and I passed the book back to him and asked him if he would sign it for me so I could tell my grandchildren I served with a future president.”

Only last winter, Mr. Gingrich was dismissing Mr. Ryan’s ideas as “right-wing social engineering.” By the spring, Mitt Romney was traveling to Capitol Hill to woo the author of those ideas. By August, he had asked him to be his running mate. And there it is — Mr. Ryan, the classic mentee, now mentor.