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Perversions of Power: Trump's Hedonism vs Pence's Puritanism

By David Rosen
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Since the nation's founding there's been a peculiar tension between the president and the vice president. This tension was first established in 1796 when John Adams became president and Thomas Jefferson the vp. The two men could not have been more different. Adams was a Northern Federalist, pro-British and morally upright, puritanically married to Abigail; Jefferson was a Southern Democratic-Republican, pro-French and worldly, intimately involved with his slave, Sally Hemings, with whom they had four surviving children who he set free.

Over the intervening two-plus centuries and nearly 50 administrations, a host of different president and vice-president tag-teams have occupied the White House. Drawing only upon some recent examples, the nation's two top officials have reflected differences in age (e.g., Eisenhower and Nixon), geography (e.g., Kennedy and Johnson) and race (e.g., Obama and Biden). Donald Trump and Mike Pence, the tug-of-war leaders who will soon occupy the headquarters of global power for the next four years, could not appear more different.

The shot-gun alliance between Trump and Pence seeks to bridge an (apparent) ideological contradiction at the heart of the Trump movement, a contradiction that may split the movement. The contradiction is clearly differentiated – symbolized — in the sexuality represented by the two men. It involves the tension between excess and restraint. Their apparent “egos” — sexual personalities — represent two of the extremes in the history of American erotic expression, hedonism and puritanism. Both are forms of repression.

Their political marriage seeks to contain the divide between the big city and small town as well as the boastful businessman and the cautious political operator.

Trump signifies all the false pomp and bullying swagger of New York big money, capital of the second-half of the 20th century. (Shanghai will likely be the capital of the 21st century, reflecting the geo-political migration of capitalism over the last three centuries.) Pence proudly considers himself a “lifelong Hoosier,” born and raised in Columbus, IN, and a born-again Christian. During the presidential campaign, he proclaimed that he was “a Christian, a conservative, and a Republican, in that order.”

Trump projects the swagger of a “self-made” “billionaire” and TV celebrity; he appears as the classic hedonist, a man of excess, of three marriages and innumerable sexual engagements (many of them unwanted assaults), of narcissistic power and self-indulgence — one who seems never satisfied. Pence embodies all the restraint of the heartland, “true” American values; he appears the classic puritan, small-town caution, whose been married to the same woman (a divorcée) for over 30 years and of sublimated desires — also one who seems never satisfied.

Since the nation’s founding, these two conflicting tendencies in male identity – the hedonist and the puritan — have shaped patriarchal self-hood. Much of American culture has been defined by the way men experience themselves as physical, sexual creatures as well as by the way they engage with and/or treat other males and females. It’s a masculine culture based on social power and never being truly satisfied.

Since his election, Trump has given mixed messages about abortion rights (opposing it except for the health of the mother), gay rights (recently dropping his opposition to same-sex marriage) and some protections for transgender people as well as with regard to non-documented immigrants and foreign-born Muslims. However, he’s said that he will sign the First Amendment Defense Act if passed by Congress; the legislation would make it legal for employers and other organizations to discriminate against LGBTQ people in the name of “religious freedom.”

With all this said, Trump seems less “culturally” reactionary than Pence and many others within the Republican-controlled Congress. Pence will likely lead to the resurgence of the Christian right and redraw the battle lines laid down Phyllis Schlafly during the first-round of the culture wars of the 1970s. As Governor of Indiana, four term Congressman and earlier radio talk-show host, Pence has long championed a religious- or faith-based (white) agenda. Facing a likely failed reelection campaign, Pence opted to be Trump’s running mate and – surely to his surprise – will become vice president.

Pence has long taken a hardline stand against a woman’s right to an abortion, even signing a law banning abortions in cases where a fetus could have a potentially life-threatening condition. He supported a state constitutional amendment banning gay marriage and, in March 2015, signed a law allowing merchants and others to discriminate against gays and lesbians for religious reasons. As VP candidate, he adopted the classic dodge arguing that “the transgender bathroom issue can be resolved with common sense at the local level.”

Pence also sought to cut state HIV/AIDS funding and increase spending for “conversion therapy” programs (by which gay youths can be “cured” and made straight). He opposed condom use by teenagers, insisting, “The only way to stay safe from premature pregnancy and sexually-transmitted diseases is to practice abstinence and pray to God, that’s the only real way to stay safe.” Pence even opposed the local Catholic archdiocese over the settlement of Syrian refugees in Indianapolis.

The renewed round of the culture wars will be relaunched as the U.S. is being reshaped by a 4th sexual revolution, one that is pushing further the revolutions of the 1840s, 1920s and 1960s. Today, the sex business has become a \$50 billion industry with more people watch porn, buying sex toys (often from Amazon) and arranging sexual liaisons via the internet and smartphones.

Over the last quarter-century, the boundaries of the “forbidden” have eroded. Among consenting adults and age-appropriate youths, anything goes, including commercial sex – if its consensual. Sex has shifted from a moral issue, “sin,” to a legal concern, “consent,” whether public or private. Today’s only true sex crime is the violation of consent, whether involving rape, pedophilia, child porn, intimate partner violence, sex trafficking, knowingly infecting someone with HIV/STD or lust murder. Psychologists have reclassified long-labeled immoral or deviant sex practices as “deviance without pathology.”

Calls to restrict a woman’s right to an abortion and birth control — along with anti-gay and anti-transgender activities — will likely increase, shaping state and local policies. The Christian right will push these policies even though a growing majority of Americans are accepting of this practices. Sadly, racism — in the form of anti-immigration harassments, anti-Muslim policies and the ongoing police killings of unarmed African-Americans – are also likely to increase. Cumulatively, these and other battles will drive the renewed culture war. It’s going to be a long and bitter next four years.