Pence, Buttigieg, Amy Coney Barret & The Political Rise of Indiana

It's very clear that various competing interests and factions within the US political establishment are pushing different agendas and strategies. These differences often play out on a regional basis.

Mike Pence, the Vice President of the United States, was relatively unknown on the national stage as Governor of Indiana, until Donald Trump selected him to be his running mate in 2016. In the following years, Pete Buttigieg, the Mayor of South Bend, a small college town in Northern Indiana, ran for President and became a major figure in the mainstream of the Democratic Party. Now, Donald Trump has selected Amy Coney Barret, a Federal Judge who is also a resident of South Bend, Indiana as his appointee to the US Supreme Court, with Democrats loudly crying foul.

Indiana is not a wealthy state. Indiana’s residents, nicknamed “Hoosiers” have been pretty badly hit by the overall economic decline of the country. Many Indiana communities have been devastated by Opioids. In the 20th Century, the city of Gary was a major center of industry with steel production and other manufacturing, but this is just history.

However, Indiana is clearly rising in political influence. In 2016, both Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump campaigned at events in Indiana, blasting the factory closings and blaming trade deals such as NAFTA. While Indiana may not have huge amounts of commerce, or even very many votes in the electoral college, it seems to be a hub for a certain
faction of the US political establishment that is fighting for its life, seeing its influence and power challenged.

**South Bend: A College Town**

South Bend, where both Buttigieg and Barrett are residents is one of the most prosperous parts of the state. The city has a population of just over 300,000 people. It is home to the University of Notre Dame, a leading Roman Catholic academic institution that not only provides education but also engages in large amounts of research.

Like most of Northern Indiana, South Bend is considered to be more or less part of the Chicago Metropolitan Area, with the major metropolis just over the Illinois border. While South Bend, with its liberal college professors who vote democrat, is an outlier, Indiana’s politics are pretty solidly Republican.

The mostly rural population is deeply opposed to abortion and homosexuality. Mike Pence made headlines around the United States and the world with his “Religious Freedom Restoration Act” passed in 2015. Critics argued this was a law that would enable conservatives to practice discrimination against the LGBT community, a huge amount of national backlash followed the passing of the legislation. Indiana is one of the 19 US states that still allows corporal punishment in its public schools.

Mike Pence was a conservative, Christian radio host who blasted Obama in his broadcasts. He was elected Governor in 2013, and was selected by Donald Trump to be Vice President in 2016. Mike Pence, like many of Indiana’s residents of German and Irish ancestry, was raised as a Roman Catholic.

However, as a college student in 1978 he attended a Christian Music Festival in Kentucky. Amid the lights and music Pence had what he described as a “born again” experience and rejected Catholicism for Non-Denominational Fundamentalist Protestantism. Apparently, Pence remained active as a Catholic Youth Minister while keeping his loyalty to Evangelicals up into the 1990s along with his wife, but finally rejected Catholicism in 1995, formally joining a “Mega-Church” called Grace Evangelical Church. Fundamentalist Christianity, with its staunch support for Israel and the Neoconservative faction of US politics has been a big part of Pence’s political identity.

**Divisions Among Roman Catholics, “Parachurch Organizations”**

Amy Coney Barret’s controversial religious ties and history is quite similar. While Barret describes herself as Roman Catholic and grew up attending Catholic mass, is it widely understood she is part of “People of Praise,” a Charismatic “parachurch organization” that recruits Roman Catholics, but maintains beliefs and practices much closer to a brand of protestant Christianity known as Pentecostalism.

“People of Praise” hold services with loud rock and roll music with congregants getting into hypnotic trance states, often to the point of incoherently babbling or “speaking in tongues.” Members of “People of Praise” conduct exorcisms to cast out demons.

While the Vatican and bulk of the Roman Catholic Church is highly critical of Donald Trump, and Pope Francis denounces capitalism, People of Praise maintains an alliance with the Federalist Society, the Heritage Foundation, and other right-wing political organizations. These groups tends to argue that minimum wage legislation, income tax, and other economic reforms are a violation of the US constitution and it protections of private property. The US press has focused primarily the outspoken opposition to abortion espoused by the “People of Praise” organization.

While the Catholic Church has been moving further and further to the left, and been much harsher in its criticism of Donald Trump in recent years, there is a layer of Catholic police officers, prosecutors and judges in urban areas are deeply conservative. The New York City Police Department, which is openly clashing with the elected city government, has many high ranking Irish and Italian-Americans among its ranks. They are Roman Catholic, but they reject the leftist tone of the Vatican. They feel police brutality protesters are out of control, and “law and order” must be restored. Brett Kavanaugh, Trump’s first pick for the Supreme Court, who was confirmed after a very ugly showdown on Capitol Hill, was clearly from this strata.

In order to counter the overall “left turn” of the Catholic Church, parachurch organizations like “People of Praise” and right-wing voices associated with Catholicism are becoming more important to the Republican Party. Barret’s selection for the Supreme Court can be understood in this context.

With many immigrants to the United States from Latin America, the Caribbean or Asia who are Roman Catholic, the white Irish and Italian communities that once were the core of American Catholicism are losing their hegemony. While Latino, Asian and Caribbean Catholics tend to vote Democrat, white Catholics are becoming more sympathetic
to the Republican Party, and more critical the Vatican.

The Neocon Wing of the CIA

A great deal has been written about the “religious right” in the United States, and its alliance with former CIA director and US President George Herbert Walker Bush, as well as his son George W. Bush. While much of the CIA has a liberal orientation, Bush and the evangelical Christians have aligned themselves with a particular faction that is out of step with most of the agency.

Barack Obama’s CIA director John Brennan admitted that he voted for Communist candidate Gus Hall in the 1976 Presidential election. Brennan made a huge point of grandstanding against the use of torture, saying that if Obama ever asked him to torture someone he would resign. Allegations that Brennan had converted to Islam were abundant, and it was clear Brennan had directed CIA operations in Saudi Arabia for many years.

Marilyn Ferguson, the spiritual advisor to Al Gore, whose occult screeds such as “The Aquarian Conspiracy” were endorsed by all kinds of CIA linked intellectuals, praised a number of research institutes and foundations in Southern California. It has been revealed that these very facilities in California were the site of all kinds of CIA experiments and research with psychics, hallucinogens, and other liberal “counter-culture” endeavors. It was strategic thinking from the liberal wing of the CIA that enabled Southern California to be the center of the computer revolution. Silicon Valley tech giants such as Microsoft, Google, Twitter, and Facebook emerged due to direct assistance from the intelligence apparatus.

However, Trump’s CIA directors, Mike Pompeo (now Secretary of State) and Gina Haspel, come from a minority tendency within the agency. It is widely alleged that Haspel and Pompeo, like Trump, feel that the United States having a reputation for engaging in torture is a good thing, as it will cast fear into the country’s enemies. Many recall the incident in which the Bush administration was accused of taking action against CIA agent Valerie Plame and revealing her ties to the agency in retaliation for criticism. US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, who spent decades in the CIA, is like Pence and Barret. He is a Midwesterner from Kansas, who grew up as a Roman Catholic, but became a Evangelical after a mystical “born again” experience as a young adult.

The Bush, Neocon faction of the CIA, which is at odds with the rest of the agency in terms of strategy and world outlook, seems to have a great deal of influence in Indiana.

For example, Indiana is home to the Hammond Independent Baptist Church, which was at one point the largest church in the world. During the 1980s, the church was known to pack the hall with 20,000 people at three different services every Sunday. Reverend Jack Hyles pioneered the practice of “bus ministry” with low income families being picked up by church vans driven by volunteers each Sunday morning and driven to attend his services.

Hyles was heavily tied to the Neoconservative wing of the CIA, with his congregation getting heavily involved in the Nicaraguan Civil War during the 1980s. Hyles raised funds for the Contras as they engaged in a violent campaign against the Sandinistas, and high schools affiliated with his Church provided education to Central American children whose parents were aligned with the anti-communist factions. Decades after Hyles death, Hammond Baptist Church still maintains influence in Nicaragua and other parts of Central America as a hub of anti-communism and pro-US sentiments.

Pete Buttigieg and “Liberal” Hawks

Jack Hyles was eventually brought down due to links to several child molestation scandals, and humiliated in the press. Hammond Baptist Church has been widely described as a cult, and his daughter Linda Hyles Murphrey has spoken harshly critical of her father in TED talks.

Pete Buttigieg, who became Mayor of South Bend, Indiana, and is now a prominent figure among Democrats, is openly gay. Buttigieg is also religious, having attended Roman Catholic schools, but converting to the liberal, mainline protestant denomination of Episcopalianism in response to Vatican’s longstanding opposition to Gay Marriage.

Despite describing his upbringing as attending wholesome Catholic schools, its not a secret Pete Buttigieg’s father was associated with Marxism and left-wing activism. The father of Pete Buttigieg was Joseph Anthony Buttigieg, a Notre Dame professor who has achieved notoriety for translating the writings of Antonio Gramsci. The project of translating the Italian Marxist’s prison notebooks was paid for with a grant from the US Governments Endowment for the Humanities. Joseph Anthony Buttigieg established the International Gramsci Society, an institution that
seems to have cooperated with the CIA’s efforts to push the Frankfurt School, the Congress for Cultural Freedom, and other “anti-Stalinist” voices among Marxist academia, most especially in western Europe.

While Buttigieg’s father may have marched against the Vietnam War, Pete has no such opposition to imperialism. Buttigieg seems to have a hawkish foreign policy view, having served in Afghanistan and emphasized his military service as key credential for President. Buttigieg made a point of accusing Bernie Sanders of being “Trump-like” during his 2020 Presidential campaign, and condemning Sanders for making positive statements about Cuba and the former Soviet Union. Buttigieg, with his equating of Trump and Bernie Sanders, and his emphasis on US military interventions, may be closer to the Neocon wing of the CIA than many suspect.

Pete Buttigieg’s identity as a gay man does not seem to contradict hawkish US foreign policy. Let’s not forget that the Hillary Clinton State Department, that unleashed chaos in Libya, Syria, Honduras, and across the planet issued a special statement to the LGBT community: “People around the globe are working hard to support you and to bring an end to the injustices and dangers you face. That is certainly true for my country. And you have an ally in the United States of America and you have millions of friends among the American people.”

Just as Southern California has served as a base for the liberal, more faction within the CIA, the impoverished rust belt state of Indiana, most especially its slightly more prosperous town of South Bend, seems to be a hub of Neoconservatives. Though the Neocons were riding high in the 1980s and 90s, since the disaster of the Bush years and the 2008-2009 financial meltdown, they have been on the defensive. Isolationists and economic nationalists attack them from the right, while soft power liberals challenge them from the left.

As the Neoconservatives push back against continued opposition to their hard-nose foreign policy, they are hedging their bets in 2016 elections. Pompeo and Pence are building up more influence within the Trump camp and seem to be pressuring Trump away from his populist and isolation rhetoric. Meanwhile, John Bolton and many figures from the administration of George W. Bush now back Biden, proclaiming Trump is a sign of the dangerous “illiberalism” in the world, which US military interventions must roll back.

As the Neocons battle to maintain their place in American politics, Indiana, a state that is clearly their territory, is likely to continue rising in prominence.

*Caleb Maupin is a political analyst and activist based in New York. He studied political science at Baldwin-Wallace College and was inspired and involved in the Occupy Wall Street movement, especially for the online magazine “New Eastern Outlook”.*