

WASHINGTON—Before Rep. Paul Ryan had a chance to sell his budget ideas to the American people, the Wisconsin Republican first had to persuade his own party.

The initial version of his "Roadmap for America's Future," in summer 2008, was treated as an afterthought by party leaders, and some were openly hostile. Fearful of political backlash, just eight Republicans signed up for his conservative wish list: rewrite the tax code, scrap employer-based health care, rework Medicare and Social Security.

Today, many of Mr. Ryan's ideas have become the de facto Republican Party platform. And they are central to the GOP's hopes of reclaiming the White House, following Mr. Ryan's selection as Mitt Romney's vice-presidential running mate. On Wednesday, Mr. Ryan will address the Republican National Convention in Florida.

"He's almost single-handedly moved the party," said Peter Wehner, one of Mr. Ryan's former bosses at a conservative think tank.

What changed? Mr. Ryan, 42 years old, gained traction as deficits soared and the tea-party movement propelled the GOP back to power in the House. President Barack Obama singled him out, once calling his ideas "deeply pessimistic"—giving the Wisconsin budget wonk an early taste of national prominence.

But the rise also displays Mr. Ryan's political personality. Democrats paint him as an ideologue. Mr. Romney calls him a deal maker. Mr. Ryan is, in fact, a complicated mix of both, his colleagues say.

"Paul would be the first to tell you he hasn't won every battle," said **Rep. John Campbell (R., Calif.)**, one of original co-sponsors of the Roadmap. But he modified his blueprint **"without compromising the fundamental goal."**

The Roadmap was born in the twilight of George W. Bush's presidency. After Republicans lost their majority in 2006, Mr. Ryan huddled with a small band of conservatives including House

allies and Sens. Tom Coburn (R., Okla.) and Jim DeMint (R., S.C.).

The group dubbed themselves "Reagan 21," taking the name of the 40th president and crafting a conservative vision for smaller 21st century government.

As the top Republican on the House Budget Committee, he had both the staff and the inclination to rethink U.S. social programs.

Mr. Ryan, who spent his early career as a policy aide in Congress and at the think tank Empower America, spent months bunkered in his office, which often doubles as his bedroom, drafting his proposal. At the time, he joked with colleagues about his self-imposed exile.

"This was something that was hatched in the garage of his own head," said Rep. Jeb Hensarling, a Texas Republican and ally.

A fifth-generation son of Janesville, Wis., Mr. Ryan worked at McDonald's as a teen, and his high-school classmates voted him prom king and "biggest brown-noser." He won his house seat in 1998, and has spent the bulk of his adult life in the capital. His wife, Janna—whom he met at her 30th birthday party, and wed in 2000—hails from a prominent family of Oklahoma Democrats, though she is no longer a Democrat. The Romney campaign declined requests to interview Mr. Ryan.

In its earliest form, in 2008, Mr. Ryan's plan set out to let taxpayers choose between the current tax code and a streamlined version with just two brackets, a top rate of 25% but fewer deductions to offset the lost revenue. He also sought to cap benefits under Medicare and Medicaid, create private investment accounts within Social Security, replace the corporate tax rate with a lower levy on profits, and redraft rules governing how Congress spends money to prevent automatic spending increases.

Under the original Roadmap, most businesses would no longer receive tax incentives to provide employee health insurance. Instead, people would get refundable tax credits to buy insurance.

When Mr. Ryan introduced the legislation, five colleagues turned up as co-sponsors. By the end of the year, only three others had signed on. Mr. Ryan introduced his second iteration, with few

major changes, in January 2010, at the height of the battle over the health-care law.

Mr. Ryan soon was in the national spotlight for perhaps the first time. Mr. Obama traveled to Baltimore to address the House GOP at its annual retreat, and cameras captured a polite exchange between Mr. Ryan and the president. Later that day, in his back-and-forth with the House GOP, the president talked about the Roadmap with semi-approval. "There are some ideas in there that I would agree with, but there are some ideas that we should have a healthy debate about because I don't agree with them," he told the crowd.

Mr. Ryan has shown an inclination to take a back seat when politically expedient. As 2010's congressional vote approached, GOP leaders readied their list of priorities for the campaign trail. Mr. Ryan didn't join the chorus of conservatives calling for his ideas to be included, because he viewed the list as a vague political proclamation. He preferred to focus energy on actual legislation if the GOP were to win.

Likewise, Mr. Ryan devoted only a few paragraphs to his budget proposal in "Young Guns," the book he co-wrote with House Majority Leader Eric Cantor of Virginia and California Rep. Kevin McCarthy that was meant to present voters a new generation of GOP leaders.

Instead, he dedicated himself to electing fellow Republicans, in part to raise his national profile. The man who until now had made clear his preference to spend weekends with his family in Janesville started spending more time on the road.

In 2008, Mr. Ryan raised about \$300,000 to help colleagues through his political action committee. In the 2010 election, that jumped to \$1 million and now totals \$4.1 million.

For his own re-election, Mr. Ryan as of June 30 had raised \$4.3 million, compared with \$1.6 million in 2008. That sizable jump shows not only his dedication to fundraising but also his elevated status within the party.

In late 2010, the GOP reclaimed a House majority. Conservatives who had campaigned, and won, on making changes to entitlements wanted to include Mr. Ryan's overhauls of Medicare,

Medicaid and Social Security among 2011 priorities. But party leaders were apprehensive. That winter, Mr. Ryan persuaded them. In one meeting, Mr. Cantor welcomed Mr. Ryan to his office for a gathering of conservative pundits and a GOP pollster.

The two sides squared off. One camp argued for Mr. Ryan's proposal to transform Medicare. The other worried it would cost the party seats. They reviewed polling that showed the Medicare plan was a political loser.

Still, despite various entreaties from fellow Republicans early last year to drop the Medicare proposal, Mr. Ryan didn't budge on it. However, he did modify other details of his plan, in some places substantially.

For example, Mr. Ryan agreed to scrap his idea to let younger workers set a portion of their Social Security taxes in investment accounts. Likewise, he revised his plan for Medicaid, the health-care program for the poor. Currently, states manage Medicaid and split the cost with the federal government. Mr. Ryan first proposed to limit the states' role by having the federal government give a set amount of money directly to individuals. He later traded that idea for one in which states would receive lump sums in exchange for greater discretion in how to spend it.

Mr. Campbell, the California Republican, says he needed Mr. Ryan for caving on Social Security. Mr. Ryan, by now the Budget Committee chairman, responded he wanted to take things one step at a time.

"Medicare is the really big fish," Mr. Campbell recalled Mr. Ryan telling him. **"I don't know that we can lift that and Social Security at the same time."**

Even with the changes, Mr. Ryan and his allies knew they faced a challenge in persuading Republicans to go along with the Medicare proposal. Party leaders commissioned polling that had more than half of independents saying they would be inclined to vote against a politician who backed it. Even among Republicans, more voters disliked the plan than liked it. "It's not that [the leadership] disagreed with him, but they didn't want to take the risk. No one wanted to do it." said Rep. Devin Nunes (R., Calif.), a Ryan ally.

The dynamic changed suddenly in February 2011: Republican House leaders faced a revolt

from a bloc of the 87 first-year Republicans. In debating a routine spending bill, the bloc demanded more spending cuts.

For party leaders, the price of winning back their support was to allow Mr. Ryan to include his Medicare proposal in that year's budget proposal. As a result, the freshmen supported the spending bill, which cut tens of billions of dollars, because they would soon have a chance to vote on a budget proposal that would slice trillions.

After getting the green light from party leaders, Mr. Ryan set about selling his colleagues on the proposal. He attended about 30 so-called listening sessions to explain how it would contain the federal deficit and preserve Medicare for future generations. (His plan is projected to shrink, but not to close, the U.S.'s forecast annual budget deficits).

Mr. Campbell opposed Mr. Ryan's plan because it failed to seek cuts from the military. He expressed his concerns in a 45-minute meeting. Mr. Ryan said he was sympathetic, but he said he didn't have the votes, even if he fully supported defense cuts, **Mr. Campbell** recalled.

"That's where Paul Ryan the budget wonk stops, and Paul Ryan who wants to get something done starts," Mr. Campbell said.

When the budget came up for a vote in April, 235 House members, all Republicans, voted for it. Only four Republicans said no.

As the Ryan Roadmap gained prominence, so did its author. He taped a series of informational videos. He adopted a new, close-cropped hairstyle and slimmer-fitting suits.

While Mr. Ryan's proposals have made him a favorite among tea-party activists, he proved a reluctant firebrand for much of his career. But in recent years he has embraced the role of attack dog and gleefully bashes the president in campaign stops.

Voter reaction to his plan came swiftly. A few days after it passed the House, freshman Rep. Lou Barletta of Pennsylvania got an earful about the proposed Medicare changes during a

forum in a down-on-its-luck town in northeastern Pennsylvania. The event erupted into a shouting match between people opposed to the plan, and people wanting deeper cuts in federal spending. Other Republicans endured similar blowback.

Mr. Obama declared war on the Republican budget. A few days before it passed, in a speech at George Washington University in Washington, D.C., the president said the GOP budget "paints a vision of our future that is deeply pessimistic," calling it "a vision that says America can't afford to keep the promise we've made to care for our seniors," Mr. Obama said.

Mr. Ryan looked on from the front row, steaming. The uproar left some rank-and-file Republicans in Congress skittish. Former House Speaker Newt Gingrich referred to Ryan plan as "right-wing social engineering."

Before he introduced the latest version of his budget earlier this year, Mr. Ryan worked with the Romney campaign and Democratic Sen. Ron Wyden of Oregon to retool the Medicare piece. Under the new concept, younger Americans would still have the option of traditional Medicare when they get older.

Mr. Wyden has since disavowed their work together because the final bill would also repeal Mr. Obama's 2010 health-care law.

The question now, having won the support of his party, is whether Mr. Ryan can win the support of the nation. Polls show voters remain unsettled over changes to the safety net. Democrats are using the Ryan plan to reprise a line of attack against Mr. Romney and other Republicans on the fall ballots.

"The Ryan plan benefits people like Mitt Romney at the expense of everyone else," said Maryland Rep. Chris Van Hollen, the top Democrat on the House Budget Committee. "It provides a much sharper contrast."

Mr. Romney's position on much of the Ryan plan remains unclear. Last year, he cheered Mr. Ryan's revised Medicare plan and in March, after tiptoeing around the Ryan budget for months,

threw both arms around the proposal in the run-up to the Wisconsin primary, telling a Chicago audience, "I'm very supportive of the Ryan budget plan. It's a bold and exciting effort."

Mr. Ryan, and by extension Mr. Romney, is gambling the country is ready to discuss reshaping the federal government. Mr. Romney's budget includes a Medicare overhaul similar to the latest version in Mr. Ryan's plan, as well as alterations like raising the retirement age and tailoring benefits to different income brackets. But there are signs of daylight between the two running mates on budget issues. Shortly after announcing Mr. Ryan as his running mate, the likely GOP nominee told CBS's "60 Minutes," "I have my budget plan...and that's the budget plan that we're going to run on."

Mr. Ryan, sitting beside Mr. Romney, didn't say a word.