



**●** In 2016, Curtis Hill topped 1.6 million votes in his race to become Indiana's attorney general, the most in state history for any office. But in the 19 months since Hill—the first black man in the role—was sworn in, he has generated heat here and around the country for a string of provocative positions—a few far outside his jurisdiction—that have left some members of Indiana's GOP elite cold.

PHOTO BY TONY VALAINIS



Indiana's attorney general.

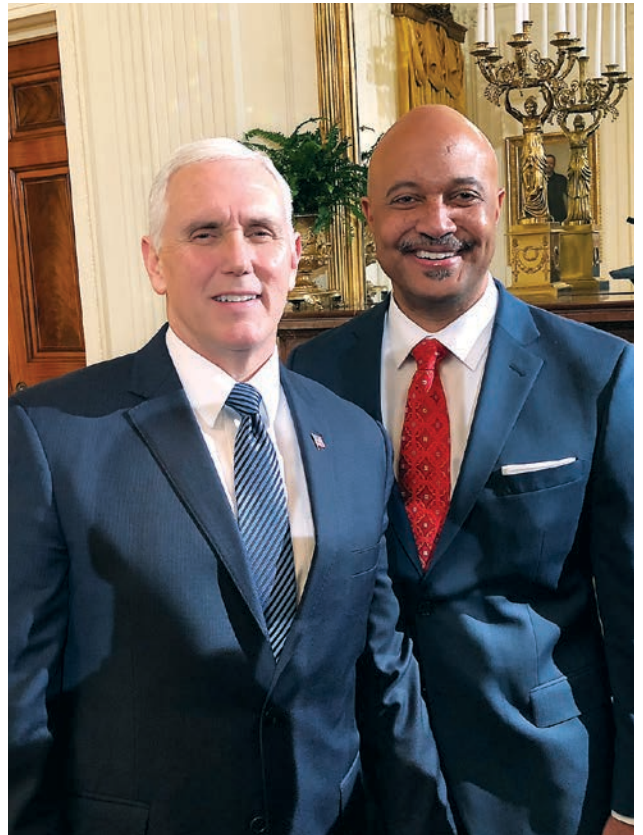
Conservative lightning rod.

Elvis impersonator.

Whatever role he takes on, **Curtis Hill** seems to perform best as a solo act.

WRITTEN BY KELLY KENDALL

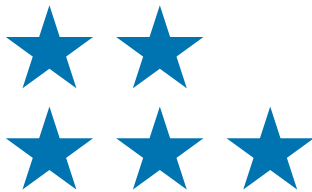
# A



**AS SEEN ON SHOWS** like *Fox & Friends* and in the Twittersphere, Curtis Hill Jr. is holding court. A lifelong lawyer, the attorney general of Indiana is accustomed to being in front of a crowd. Today, he has returned to his alma mater, Indiana University Maurer School of Law in Bloomington, for a standing-room-only chat with students in the Moot Court Room. As Hill paces back and forth in front of the students, like he has before countless juries in his 16 years as the elected prosecuting attorney in Elkhart County, he sounds less like a conservative firebrand than he does a sitcom dad during that five minutes of “serious talk” toward the end of the episode.

One of the most important lessons they will ever need, he tells the aspiring lawyers, is getting comfortable with the word “no.” Even when you pick up the phone and it’s a friend on the other end of the line, mentioning his buddy who, well, just got a DUI—but he’s a great guy! A pillar





of the community! Couldn't you maybe ...?

No. Hill couldn't.

"I tell them, 'OK, now you can go back and tell your buddy you tried.' You don't make a lot of friends that way—" and here, Hill pauses for emphasis, his silver watch glinting beneath the fluorescent lights as he gestures—"but if that's the case, they weren't really your friends to begin with."

Hill's not here to make friends, anyway. In the 19 months since he put his hand on a Bible and was sworn in as Indiana's first black male attorney general, he has made headlines here and around the country for a string of provocative positions. He has tangled with fellow Republicans, including Governor Eric Holcomb, on hot topics ranging from needle-exchange programs for drug addicts to marijuana-derived CBD oil for, um, dogs. That last disagreement arose at a legislative conference a month before the Indiana General Assembly convened in January: Mayor Thomas McDermott of Hammond accused Hill of "grandstanding" in his insistence that CBD, or cannabidiol, oil is illegal to sell in this state, and asked if his arthritic 12-year-old Labrador retriever, Teddy, was breaking the law with the treatments he receives for pain. In a bipartisan move, Holcomb told *The Times of Northwest Indiana* two days later that he, too, would at least consider using CBD oil on the "First

**"Is he running for attorney general," some people question with raised eyebrows, "or governor, or president?"**

Dog" lest 7-year-old miniature schnauzer Henry Holcomb fall ill.

Teddy and Henry can breathe a little easier as of July 1, when CBD oil containing no more than 0.3 percent THC (the substance that produces a marijuana high) becomes legal to buy, sell, and possess in Indiana. Holcomb signed the CBD bill into law in March, saying it provided "much-needed clarity" after a year of confusion over the stuff's status.

But! The new law doesn't address whether you can manufacture CBD oil in the state, opening the door to yet another potential squabble. And if Hill comes to the conclusion that CBD manufacturing is indeed illegal here, he'll have no qualms about saying so. That much has become clear during his first year in office.

"He's been controversial," acknowledges local political observer Brian Howey, who has published the non-partisan *Howey Politics Indiana* since 1994. "I don't think I've seen one of the constitutional officers in the Statehouse be so willing to buck his own governor and his own party." Which is not, Howey adds, necessarily a bad thing. "Everyone has the right to have their own opinions. He's very conservative. You could say he's ideological. Former prosecutors tend to be like that—they seem to see things a little more black-and-white."

Yet that ramrod-straight image doesn't quite get at it, either. After he was elected, Hill's office sent out a press release teasing that the AG moonlights **CONTINUED ON PAGE 155**



The demands of the job take Hill from the White House—here with fellow Hoosier and culture warrior Vice President Mike Pence—to promoting prescription-drug education among students at Perry Meridian High School (opposite page). The attorney general knows how to find the spotlight, whether in Elvis garb with former Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, suited up on Monument Circle, or sporting a tux with father Curtis Sr. at Hill's 1993 wedding (clockwise from left).



PHOTOS PROVIDED BY THE OFFICE OF THE ATTORNEY GENERAL



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as, of all things, an Elvis impersonator. The 56-year-old even owns a custom spangled white jumpsuit, which he dons to croon tunes at friends' parties and fundraisers like the annual Hoosier Idol contest (clips of these hip-shimmying performances are on YouTube). In 2010, at a national judicial conference in Napa Valley, he landed in the lap of former Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, whom he serenaded with "Can't Help Falling in Love With You."

Back at the IU law school, students wanted to know about some of Hill's more divisive stances, like his opinion on hate-crime laws (Indiana is one of just five states without any, which Hill is glad of) and the Keith Cooper case, the saga of a man who spent nearly a decade in prison before being set free in 2006 as the evidence against him unraveled. A social media campaign driven by his supporters was sometimes misleading, maintains Hill, but he concedes that it turned Cooper's case into "a cause célèbre." While he had not been involved with Cooper's trial, the prosecutor's office he now headed was being blamed for oppressing an innocent man. In 2017, Holcomb pardoned Cooper, exonerating him in Indiana's first-ever "actual innocence pardon." This was cheered by the Indiana Parole Board and even the Elkhart County prosecutor who had originally won Cooper's robbery conviction. Hill, on the other hand, had consistently defended Cooper's conviction in the media and in court—which, he says, his job required him to do.

These days, thanks to appearances on Fox News and interviews with newspapers such as the *Washington Post* and *The Wall Street Journal*, Hill has established a national profile that seems, strangely, more favorable with the GOP at large than Republican wonks here at home. He tweets about national issues, like the Charlottesville riot and the U.S. withdrawal from the Paris Accord—topics that don't exactly

leap to mind as the purview of the Indiana attorney general. He writes essays criticizing NFL players kneeling during the anthem. Then he goes on TV to expound on those theories (in Hill's view, African Americans should focus more on black-on-black violence than police brutality).

So is Hill a stand-up guy, or a guy who grandstands? I asked—but state Republicans get very quiet when the subject is Curtis Hill.

**IF YOU WANT** to make Jeremy Brilliant, Hill's director of communications, cringe and rub the bridge of his nose, just bring up this quote widely attributed to his boss: "We can't save the drug users. I'm a realist."

"Ugh, I've gotten asked about that quote so many times..." says Brilliant with a brave smile but unmistakable weariness in his voice.

Brilliant maintains the line was a misquote—that what Hill really said, while discussing the state's opioid crisis at a Republican dinner, was, "We can't save *all* the drug users." Still, the comment immediately pinged back and forth across the state when it went public in March 2017, raising many an eyebrow among Indiana politicians and burnishing Hill's reputation as a hard-line, well, hardhead. "That upset a lot of people at the Statehouse, the General Assembly, and the governor's people don't believe that either, I know," says Howey.

The thing is, it kind of sounds like the sort of thing Hill might have said, maybe without really meaning to, so much of a crusader has he been—against even those in his own party—when it comes to needle-exchange programs, where drug users receive clean needles and turn in used, dirty ones. The idea is that, yes, addicts will still probably shoot up heroin—but at least clean needles will stem the spread of AIDS and hepatitis C. After Scott County was deemed the site of a historic HIV epidemic, which turned out to be the largest ever in Indiana and one of the biggest in U.S. history, Governor Mike Pence reluctantly agreed to let it set up a needle-exchange program. Shortly after, he signed a law letting any Indiana county institute a program like that—if it could prove an epidemic was underway there, too. Once Holcomb got into office, he drastically expanded the programs,

removing the stipulation that a county must first prove it has a public-health emergency.

Hill is not a fan of these programs. For a host of reasons, he does not believe they work; more important, in his book, he believes legislators have not been given all the facts on them. He even made news by tangling with the national Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in September, announcing to news outlets that the group had asked him to change its data in order to push its own agenda. But CDC officials maintain that the data has been correct all along—they were just correcting Hill's misinterpretation of it. They're among several major organizations, including the National Institutes for Health and the World Health Organization, that urge needle-exchange programs as a way to stem epidemics of certain diseases.

Christopher Abert is on the front lines of the opioid crisis as director of the Indiana Recovery Alliance, which administers a needle-exchange program in Monroe County. (The Alliance had also run one in Lawrence County, which shut down its program in October under political pressure.) "Curtis Hill really is the major obstacle here," says Abert. "To me, it's really alarming for someone without any professional or educational background to suddenly undermine decades of research." Hill, Abert points out, is, after all, a lawyer by training. "If he has someone who's an epidemiologist who wants to present data to us that this does not work, we would change what we're doing."

Whatever exactly was said about saving drug users, or not, it may have been just the opportunity some Republicans needed to distance themselves from the attorney general.

Because it's hard not to notice the difference in enthusiasm when you talk to the Democratic state party chair versus the guy in charge of Hill's own party. John Zody, the Democrat, has plenty to say about Indiana's attorney general: He asked for a pay raise his very first month in office (not true, says Hill—he had a conversation with state Senator Randy Head at one point about raises for all Indiana officeholders, and Head went on to formally propose the idea, but the AG made no official request himself). He's spending \$300,000 to renovate his office in the Statehouse (mostly true, according to

an *Indianapolis Star* story that cited an open-records request). He was a Johnny-come-lately in responding to the Scott County situation in 2017, and has stood in the way of progress there and with other needle-exchange programs. “He got more votes than anyone else in Indiana history, so maybe he thinks he has more sway,” says Zody. “He’s supposed to be the governor’s attorney. And he’s supposed to be in charge of consumer protection. I haven’t seen a lot of action in that regard.” (Zody must not be looking, counters Hill—the consumer-complaints division, he says, is one of the most active areas of his office).

All criticisms to be expected, more or less, from the other side of the aisle. But state Republican chairman Kyle Hupfer’s humdrum assessment of Hill isn’t.

*Wow! Curtis Hill scored 1.6 million votes when he was elected Indiana attorney general in 2016. Where is all that enthusiasm coming from?*

A softball question like this is, of course, a golden opportunity for Hupfer to rave about the wonder that is Curtis Hill, a rising star in his party, a god among men. Instead, I hear the aural equivalent of a shrug. “If you look back historically, the AG has for several years led the ticket,” says Hupfer. “It’s down-ballot, it’s a less-contested race, people don’t know those candidates. They knew Governor Holcomb, they knew Todd Young. Not nearly as many people knew Curtis Hill.”

Hupfer attributes Hill’s success in getting elected to the “incredible enthusiasm for the Trump/Pence ticket in Indiana.” Oh, and there was no third-party candidate—that helped, too.

So what strengths of Hill’s are voters responding to? “Again what I would come to is that there’s been a long trend of strong Republican leadership in this state. Hoosiers have been very happy with Republicans across the board.”

Does Hill have a promising future? “I don’t really speculate on folks’ future ...”

One thing Hupfer does acknowledge about Hill is that he is the only African-American Republican currently elected to an Indiana statewide office. “It’s something [Republicans] tout—how diverse our elected officials are. You have Curtis Hill—and women—serving in statewide office.” (Both parties have a number of state senators and representatives who are black.)

## Hill’s father was a longtime president of the local chapter of the NAACP during the 1950s and 1960s, and an active leader in the Civil Rights movement.

Governor Holcomb had even less to say about Hill. When asked about the attorney general and his approach to needle-exchange programs—along with any other remarks about the man, a key opportunity to talk up a fellow Republican—Holcomb’s office merely sent an email with some boilerplate language emphasizing the governor’s own support of needle-exchange programs. No comment on Hill himself, even upon follow-up request.

Off the record, terms like “BMOC” and “ambitious” get sarcastically banded around Curtis Hill. “Is he running for attorney general,” some people question with raised eyebrows, “or governor, or president?”

**HILL CARRIES HIMSELF** with such military bearing and speaks so precisely, often pausing to select exactly the right word or phrase he is seeking, it’s hardly surprising that he kind of wishes he’d grown up during the draft era. But he came of age post-Vietnam, too late for the days of maybe, at any moment, being called up for military service, something he thinks would be good for most young people. As things turned out, he frequently marches into courtrooms, modern-day battlefields of their own, a General Patton in pinstripes.

He’s been keenly aware of what it’s like to stare down your enemy for almost as long as he can remember. Hill’s father, Curtis Sr., was the first black person to buy land in what was then an all-white neighborhood of Elkhart. This was in the late 1950s, when so-called “restricted” areas of town weren’t unheard of. What happened next was all too common, too.

Hill Sr.’s neighbors called him to a meeting and warned him not to build on the property he had purchased. He did anyway, and moved in with his wife and four young children. In 1961, Curtis Jr. came along, and when he

was three or four years old, some folks tossed a bomb at the house. It failed to blow up, but the danger was real. In response, Hill Sr. went out and bought a new shotgun, which he put behind the door of his bedroom, where it would stay just about until the day he died.

“That was one of those moments that, for whatever reason, it’s still in my mind as far as what I can remember about those early days,” says Hill Jr. now. It seared into his memory an image of his father—a young man protecting his family against hatred and violence—something he has often recalled now that he has five children of his own with his wife, Teresa. “I think it certainly set a pattern for who I became.”

Hill’s father, a mailman, was also a longtime president of the local chapter of the NAACP during the 1950s and 1960s, and an active leader in the Civil Rights movement. Both he and his wife, Eleanor, a cosmetologist by training who worked in a local factory in the evenings while Curtis Jr. was growing up, were independent-minded when it came to politics. Their youngest son got his values from them, he says, if not the political party where he has landed. Which is no contradiction, because the single biggest thing he learned from his parents was to think, then make up his own mind.

Hill’s own formative political years came at the dawn of the 1980s, when he was studying business at IU and watching Jimmy Carter’s presidency give way to that of a certain charismatic governor from California. “Ronald Reagan brought a renewed energy and sense of American pride that I really think was lost in the Carter years, notwithstanding that I think Jimmy Carter is a brilliant man,” says Hill. As an impressionable college kid, he took Reagan’s message and imagery deeply to heart—the idea of a shining city on a hill, a new day rising.

## For one Indiana prosecutor, Hill's genius lies not necessarily in national alliances or a how-will-this-play-with-the-base method of politicking. It's the way he quietly gets things done.

"[Reagan's] credibility was off the charts," says Hill. "You didn't have to agree with everything he did, but you believed in him, and you believed that he loved America. You believed that he would do what he thought was right."

*What he thought was right.* Those words might as well be etched on Hill's tombstone one day, so often does he return to themes of fairness and justice.

"The concept of being a prosecutor when I was in law school appealed to me because of the sense of service, and of right and wrong," says Hill. "Being a young deputy prosecutor was a way to protect as many people as possible. Once the rapists and child molesters and drug dealers were held accountable, my community was safer, and I felt good about that."

Being right, Hill has learned, feels even better than being popular. "I feel no pressure to toe the party line," he says. "But I think that is an issue that does take place, and that's a reason why we have so much difficulty in government and in political life. A lot of people spend too much time worrying about keeping their job, getting elected, instead of doing what they think is right."

Maybe if Hill kissed a few more babies, scratched the backs of a few more Republican colleagues, floated a few more quid pro quos the way of influential politicians, he'd have more friends. But friends, as he recently warned that classroom of IU law students, can be overrated.

**ABDUL-HAKIM SHABAZZ**—political commentator, writer, observer, and, like Hill, a longtime attorney—does consider him a "close, personal friend" since the two got to know each other on the 2016 campaign trail. He allows that his pal has had a bit of a tough first year. In traditional attorney-general

areas like consumer protection, he's doing just fine, says Shabazz. "I do think he's maybe expanded the voice of the AG in ways that other AGs haven't, and that's caused a little bit of a stir." Because it doesn't really matter who you are—if you go to Shabazz for his political consulting services, he'll caution you against making a big splash your freshman year in office. Watch, he advises. Learn. Figure out who the key players are, where all the bathrooms are. Maybe next year, the time will come to be bolder, more aggressive.

"I think [Hill's office] took a bit of a different route, and are realizing that a little lower profile might have been in order," says Shabazz. Still, he says, despite the occasional mutterings from some corners, it doesn't exactly hurt anything to pick up the phone when Fox News calls. "Why *wouldn't* you?" he says with a laugh. Sure, he acknowledges, the risk is that you get called ambitious. "But the positive is that people pay attention to you and your office who may not have done so. It raises the profile of the office, and the state of Indiana."

Hill deserves the attention, too, says Shabazz. "Yes, Indiana is a conservative state, and attorney generals usually tend to go Republican. But at the same time, you've gotta have a quality candidate who's doing all the work. You may have sort of a tailwind that sort of helps push you along, but if you're not doing the work, not making the contacts—what my uncle used to call the 'street hustle'—none of that will do you any good."

And—let's face it—a black Republican politician is a *rara avis*, one that party leaders aren't always quite sure what to do with. Earlier this year, Michael Steele, who served as the first African-American chairman of the Republican National Committee from

2009 to 2011, made headlines when a speaker at the Conservative Political Action Conference remarked that "we elected Mike Steele to be the RNC chair because he's a black guy—that was the wrong thing to do." The speaker—of all people, the CPAC communications director—added that Steele's selection had been a reaction to Barack Obama getting elected president. Steele called the remarks "painfully stupid," and has also said he believes President Donald Trump is a racist.

Even Hill, a "proud Republican," admits the GOP's approach to issues facing the black community bothers him sometimes. "We have great ideas," he says. "But we sometimes have a tendency to not humanize these ideas enough. I think engagement in concepts and programs that aren't typically considered 'Republican' is the best way to do that."

That's one reason Hill has made time to work closely with the Ten Point Coalition, an Indianapolis group organized by black clergy, which takes to the streets to fight violent crime. Its emphasis on private engagement over government involvement makes it catnip to Republicans, and indeed, Hill's national counterpart, U.S. Attorney General Jeff Sessions, raved about it when Hill brought him in from Washington for a boots-on-the-ground meeting with the Ten Point board. Since that fall visit, Hill's office has awarded \$50,000 in grant money to Ten Point to expand its efforts to the east side; he had already announced the start of a \$500,000 seed fund to help groups follow Ten Point's model all around the state.

Not surprisingly, given Hill's just-the-facts-ma'am style as a prosecutor, Ten Point Coalition found that for him, numbers talked. Hill looked at the crime spreadsheets for areas they'd been walking, and liked what he saw. Since then, says Ten Point Coalition state outreach coordinator Reverend Charles Ellis, Hill has been an ally both in the boardroom and on the streets. "He's partnered with us, been a man of his word," says Ellis. And that Sessions visit, which prompted an outcry from more than a dozen local black clergy members concerned about the national AG's racist reputation? "Just to be at the table to have conversations about this being a national model," recalls Ellis, "it was very, very exciting."

For Nate Harter, prosecuting attorney in Decatur County, Hill's genius lies not necessarily in national alliances or a how-will-this-play-with-the-base method of politicking. It's the way he quietly gets things done—like recruiting staff to boost the Elkhart County Prosecutor's Office from a part-time outfit into a full-time one, filling up desks between the time he was elected in November and when he raised his right hand in January. "Even the phones were working on the very first day," says Harter.

When Hill pursued the AG office in 2016, Harter served as his surrogate in a region of the state the would-be AG couldn't often reach. "Basically, if it was south of 70 on a weeknight, I would handle a lot of those," says Harter.

Those rubber-chicken political dinners and fundraising events get notoriously old fast. Why did Harter bother when the prize wasn't even his to win?

"I thought [Hill] was a tremendous executive," he says. "He did a really good job with the people who worked for him—giving them leeway to make mistakes, but also coaching them and helping them to expand their own potential." Harter also watched Hill fight to get the resources he needed for his office—a gym for his employees' health, an entire floor devoted to victims' advocacy. He heard the way law enforcement around the state talked about Hill, from beat cops and road deputies to chiefs of police—all grateful for someone paying attention to public safety.

"That speaks to what he promised to do," says Harter, "and the promise of what his administration can provide for the state."

**SO, THE \$6 MILLION QUESTION:** Is Curtis Hill the next Indiana politician poised to make the leap to the national stage? Twelve years ago, Tom Cole thought so.

In 2006, Cole, now an Oklahoma congressman, chaired the National Republican Congressional Committee, a group responsible for managing the party's house campaigns—in essence, building the GOP from the ground up. He heard about this black Republican prosecutor from Indiana, who happened to be from a district that had gone Democrat that year (to Joe Donnelly). Cole saw the area as

naturally Republican territory, and thought he might have just the man to take it back. Upon learning that Hill was a founding-fathers buff, Cole flew him out to Washington, D.C., to introduce him to the Bush White House team, stroll past the monuments, and woo him with a pitch about how—*just imagine*—he could become a part of American history himself. Then Cole flew out to Indiana to continue his full-court press. "God, he's just great," Cole later reminisced to a writer for *The New York Times Magazine*. "He's just a star."

But Hill didn't take the bait, despite calling the experience "very intoxicating." Two of his children were still under the age of 6, and he didn't think uprooting to D.C. was the best move for his family.

These days, his youngest are in high school. The nest up in Elkhart, where he returns home as much as possible, is getting emptier. He has, he acknowledges, more "freedom."

Which means finally considering, at least, political office beyond Indiana's borders. "The way I see it, opportunities where I can perhaps be of greater service as they come about—I have to look at those," says Hill. "I can't say there's anything that's off the board."

Most of the time, though, this is one area where Hill is happy to play the good politician: When asked about his future plans, he usually keeps pretty mum. Happy where he is, and all that, ignoring the buzz about whether he might challenge Holcomb in 2020.

"Everybody likes to have their name mentioned," says Shabazz. But based on his own interactions with Hill, he doesn't see serious politicking in the man's near future. "He just ran for statewide office, and won," points out Shabazz. "And his family still lives up in Elkhart County. It's nice to be

## When asked about his future plans, he usually keeps pretty mum. Happy where he is, and all that, ignoring the buzz about whether he might challenge Holcomb in 2020.

offered and asked, but how do you run for the Senate and be attorney general and still try to do your job and be a good dad and husband? I think you'd be stupid to not kind of entertain it, but then you'd also be stupid to want to do it with all those other things in play right now."

Howey, for one, doesn't see a clear path for Hill. "He seems to be ambitious," concedes Howey. "He comes off very confident. But there's not really a lot of places for him to go." Howey is betting on Governor Holcomb running for re-election in 2020, so Hill's next shot there would be six years away, at which point he'd face well-positioned foes such as House Speaker Brian Bosma and Lieutenant Governor Suzanne Crouch. The two U.S. Senate seats are also pretty much spoken for the next six years, in Howey's view.

Nobody knows what the future holds, observes Shabazz, and if Hill is even toying with a run for higher office, now is the time to be laying the groundwork. "If you're thinking about maybe one day down the road running for something, you don't start running the day you announce."

At his IU law school speech, one student raises his hand. It's been widely reported that Hill has been kicking the tires on a Senate bid ...

Hill smiles. "I just got elected AG. I think I'll drive this vehicle for a while."

But if you think he's expecting, even for a moment, that it will be an easy cruise, think again. As I gather up my materials after our first interview for this story, I mention that I plan to talk to some of Hill's friends and colleagues, too. He laughs. "*Curtis Hill? That guy is such a prick.*" he says, imagining out loud the material I've been getting. I assure him I haven't heard anything of the kind. He just smiles again. "You will." ■