



## Episode 905: Pat Buchanan's Inside Story of the Nixon Years

Guest: Pat Buchanan

**WOODS:** I do the show five days a week; I have a lot of books, can't read them all; I have to use the press materials. But yours – I blame you for this – I have been up night after night far too late, groggy the next day because I couldn't stop reading this thing. I cannot imagine how exhilarating Pat Buchanan's life must have been from the mid '60s up through the early '70s, but also extremely exhausting. Can you start by describing what your role and relationship with Nixon was like once you – of course you'd worked with him before he was elected president, but once you entered the White House, what were you doing for him?

**BUCHANAN:** Well, for three years with Nixon, I had been an aide to him, had traveled to the Middle East with him and done all this work with him as his principal aide for the first year in '66-'67, and then went through those campaigns and that great close campaign of 1968. In 1969, I was sort of formally assigned to the speechwriting shop for Nixon, but I had a special relationship with him, I had communicated with him constantly by memos back and forth and telephone calls. And so this is the way we communicated basically for five and a half years till that helicopter pulled off. I wrote many of his speeches. I was his political advisor. I was his reach to the conservative movement and conservative cause. I was basically the ambassador to the right wing in the White House. So we had many, many roles and you were involved in many, many things.

**WOODS:** I was interested to read not only the different things you wrote – it was interesting to see your "neither fish nor fowl" memo, which was a very tough memo sent to the president marked up in his own hand in the appendix of this book. But also what's interesting is the interplay between the different people in the administration, particularly among, for example, the speechwriters. You were also working along Bill Safire, who was a much more conventional, middle-of-the-road Republican. So how did Nixon get the most out of the both of you? Would he think, Here's an issue where Buchanan's going to be off the rails so I'd better go to Bill?

**BUCHANAN:** Well, speeches, Nixon, when he gave what you might call his "blue-sky" speeches, his inaugurals, you know, where you're going to build a new generation of peace, he would use Ray Price, who was basically what was in those days a liberal Republican, say a Rockefeller Republican. Ray had written the endorsement of LBJ against Goldwater for *The New York Herald Tribune* as chief editorial writer. Safire was a PR man from New York who was very close to the political establishment in New York, but he was a gifted writer. And Nixon – he was considered in writing sort of a

pragmatist, but basically he was a very liberal Republican, as was Len Garment, who was in Nixon's entourage who'd been a partner in New York. There were a couple more conservatives. The famous Tom Charles Huston, who was my good friend, I helped bring in. Former head of YAF was in the speechwriting shop, as was Bill Gavin, who's a very gift conservative writer, as was Lee Huebner, who had the office next to me, Tom, who was the head of the Ripon Society. You had a tremendously mixed group, between left and right fairly balanced, in the speechwriting shop.

But in the West Wing, there was really no key advisor who was really a movement conservative, and in the Nixon White House, other than Nixon himself, the conservatives were really considered as folks who were allies but not terribly attractive allies and who had no place else to go, as the cliché went in those days.

**WOODS:** I'm very interested in your relationship with Spiro Agnew, whom I didn't realize how much I liked until I read your book. And in particular, especially in light of current events, to read about that Des Moines speech against the media and that Nixon was able to use Agnew as kind of the attack dog so that Nixon could stay above the fray in some cases. Trump doesn't have that luxury because I think Pence isn't frankly all that inclined and he's not that bright. But you had this all-out onslaught on the media after the first year or so of Nixon's time in office with the argument being that we have the right to communicate with the public without it being twisted before it even reaches them. And you favored a tough speech and Nixon favored a tough speech and Agnew went out and gave it. When you look back on that, what are your feelings about that today? Looks like Trump's doing the same thing. But do you think that had any good effect? Did it rally the troops?

**BUCHANAN:** Oh, it was extraordinary. It was extraordinary. People don't realize that Nixon's first year, he really was trying to get along with the establishment and the media to build a generation of peace. He had a very mollifying inaugural address. But as the year went on, we got into the fall when the students came back to school and these monstrous demonstrations, 250,000 and 350,000, October 15th, November 15th. And I wrote Nixon a memo saying, you know, your presidency is really in danger here. Even David Broder at *The Washington Post* was saying Nixon is likely to have his presidency broken this fall as LBJ's was. And Nixon turned around and delivered a nationwide address, the "great silent majority address" to the country, rallied the country, which supported it 70%.

But then Nixon's speech fell into the network correspondents and anchors who savaged it that same night. Nixon was enraged. And so I sent him a memo two days after the speech saying now is the time to launch an all-out attack on the networks, the three networks which provided the news and information about the world and the nation for two-thirds of the American people. There were no rivals to them nationally. And so I drafted the speech and Nixon quietly vetted it over in the Oval Office, and I gave it to Spiro Agnew or wrote it for Agnew and he edited it, and he delivered it on November 13th, 1969. And all three networks turned it live and primetime and it just tore the hide off the networks, both for their enormous concentration of power, their bias and hostility to the Nixon presidency, and the abuse of that power to really advance their own agenda. What we said in effect was, Look, we can't censor anybody but we've got the same right to – you are people of power as well as we, and we've got the same right to question your bias, your fairness, your objectivity, your neutrality, your

character, just as you question ours. And it was a sensation, and at the end of that first year, Tom, if you can believe it, Nixon was at 68% approval with 19% opposed [laughing].

**WOODS:** In fact, wasn't there a year where he was —

**BUCHANAN:** It was astonishing. I don't think Donald's going to make it.

**WOODS:** No, but in fact, I think there was a year where you said he was voted the most admired man in America.

**BUCHANAN:** He was the most admired man in America, number two was Billy Graham, and number three was Spiro T. Agnew, former liberal Republican governor of Maryland who was regarded as a liberal because he'd been all for Rockefeller before Rockefeller deigned not to run. And secondly, he had enacted the first state civil rights law, I think, south of the Mason-Dixon border.

**WOODS:** Let me be blunt and ask you this. You worked with Nixon for several years before he entered the White House, and yet there's a sense in your book of a, if not bewilderment, then a surprise, anyway, that the conservatives were not very well represented in his administration. And plenty of conservatives were unhappy about this, as you document in the book. But yet I recall an episode from the book where Ehrlichman said to Arthur Burns, who was upset about the Family Assistance Plan, which I think would have been something like a guaranteed income for people — and Burns said, Well, this runs counter to the president's whole philosophy, and you quote Ehrlichman as saying, "Don't you realize the president doesn't have a philosophy?" So in light of all this, why would you be surprised that the White House composition turned out as it did?

**BUCHANAN:** Well, because the campaign we had conducted. Nixon ran a campaign in 1968 in the primaries where to me the great threats were Wallace on the right and Reagan getting into the race and tearing away a lot of Nixon votes and maybe tearing away the nomination from him. We had run a center-right campaign for the nomination and won it. We put together the Nixon Southern Republicans as well as the Reagan Republicans, and I assumed naturally that that was where we would move when we got into Washington in the White House. But here you brought in Henry Kissinger from Harvard, who was Rockefeller's man, Pat Moynahan, chief domestic policy fellow who had been an LBJ man and JFK man. Then you had Romney whom we had beaten, was a liberal Republican, over at HUD, and Bob Finch, a moderate and liberal Republican at HEW. And so the cabinet and the West Wing, there simply were no movement conservatives in there except for Pat Buchanan. Me and Rushford used to talk that Buchanan holds down the conservative desk in the Nixon White House.

**WOODS:** Let's talk about the Supreme Court, because there I think initially you do see with Nixon, I think he genuinely did want to put strict constructions on the court. And of course we know what happened with his first two nominees. Haynsworth seems like he would have been a good justice and didn't get through. Carswell looks like he would have been a fiasco. But what I couldn't quite get from your book was precisely how we go from Haynsworth to Harry Blackman so quickly. It can't just be the people vetting this guy were doing a lousy job, because that'd be the understatement of the century.

**BUCHANAN:** Well, what happened was the first choice we had was Burger for chief justice, and frankly that was because of the piece Burger had written in *U.S. News and World Report* in 1967, which was part of a speech he had given at Ripon College on law and order and criminal justice, which I had marked up and sent to Nixon up at his apartment when I was working down at his law firm. And so that got Burger and his chief justice when Earl Warren quit.

Now, Nixon's primary concern incidentally was two things. One of them was the criminal justice decisions of the Supreme Court, which really enhanced the power of what Nixon called the criminal classes as against the peace classes in the country. And secondly, he also, there was the judicial activism, the remaking of American society from the bench. And so he actually sought to get and he promised to put a Southern judge on the court, and when he didn't get Haynsworth and Carswell were both defeated, it was almost a semi-panic. They reached out and got someone in a couple of days. And I think it was on the recommendation of Chief Justice Burger who was from Minnesota. It was Harry Blackman and he was not regarded as a great liberal when he first came aboard. They were called the Minnesota Twins, you know, after the baseball team [laughing].

But what happened was Blackman turned sharply left and became an active liberal. And I discussed that whole court as it's come down through the years, that not only him but Sandra Day O'Connor – you talk the other one, the fellow that George H.W. Bush appointed, the fellow from New Hampshire, David what's-his-name, he became a very liberal justice. And so we really failed in terms of remaking the Supreme Court.

**WOODS:** Why do you think it is that so many Republican justices turn out to be liberals or leaning left, and yet no Democratic justices on the court suddenly became conservative and surprise us?

**BUCHANAN:** I think the ideology of really the political elites in this country in both parties basically drifts to the left socially, culturally, morally. That's very true. And the conservatives on these issues, politically as well, really have to swim against a tremendous tide. That's why I think when we got Scalia, that was Reagan's White House when we got him, but by then we had come to realize that you had to vet these judges way back when and much more closely than we had. I don't think Carswell was vetted at all. Meaning, when he was appointed – I have a story in there. I called him on the phone –

**WOODS:** Oh yeah.

**BUCHANAN:** [laughing] He had not written anything he was proud of. He had not written any articles. He didn't have any opinions. He was just a guy on the fifth circuit down in Florida. And what Bob said, the first thing that Bob said, he's got a speech which is a celebration of segregation.

**WOODS:** Right, right. I remember – I think from that story, you put the phone down and said, "I think we're in trouble [laughing]."

**BUCHANAN:** [laughing]

**WOODS:** Ouch.

**BUCHANAN:** But his vote was better than that of Haynsworth. Haynsworth was a very valid — he was the youngest chief judge in the United States, head of the fourth circuit. He was really savaged and brutalized. He had a stock portfolio and some of his decisions obviously affected companies, and they were saying this was why he did it. The stock went up \$1 worth or something. It was just outrageous what Birch Bayh and Teddy Kennedy did to him and would frankly do to Robert Bork.

**WOODS:** All right now, Pat, I want to ask you a toughie here. I want to make a conservative case against maybe one of the major, major preoccupations of the Nixon White House, of course, which was winding down the Vietnam War. Now obviously, it's a different situation Nixon faces than Kennedy and Johnson did, because they got the U.S. involved and he's simply trying to get the U.S. out somehow. I get that.

But I think a lot of people who supported Nixon had supported the acceleration of the war in those previous administrations, so my question would be this: at the very time that the Vietnam War is going on, there's a cultural revolution going on in America and it's accelerated by the war. The war's doing all kinds of things to make it worse. And there is that old Burkean conservatism that says we can't spread the natural rights of man to all the countries of the earth. There is going to be some amount of wickedness that we simply cannot overcome. We have to be content with what we can accomplish in our own hearth and home. And in the case of Vietnam, Vietnam went communist anyway. When all was said and done, it went communist anyway. Nothing really changed other than the tragedy of those people. But there are tragedies all over the world that we can't fix, and meanwhile, while we were trying to fix that one, we lost our own country at home. All our resources were going overseas. We lost the culture of our own country at home. Isn't that a reasonable case for maybe in retrospect not doing this?

**BUCHANAN:** Not doing Vietnam? Look, there's no argument for fighting a major war and losing it. I agree. But let me say I was supportive of the war in Vietnam when John F. Kennedy sent the 16,000 in there and the Green Berets and John Wade had that movie in 1968 about the Green Berets. And I supported Lyndon Johnson as an editorial writer, and Nixon supported him all the way through up until 1968. Now, my belief, though, was we kept arguing we can win the war if we take certain actions, the bombing and the mining of Haiphong, and frankly, would have had to sort of cut Vietnam and North Vietnam in half.

And I believed we could win a victory there and stop the communist empire from expanding further and further. Now, I think Nixon believed that '65, '66, but by '69, he had come to believe I think that he simply could not continue the war. Hubert Humphrey had come out for a bombing halt and LBJ had come out and imposed a bombing halt just before the election. The country was fed up with the war. And Nixon, I think included along with Kissinger, the only thing we can do is give the folks in South Vietnam a decent chance to prevail in this war and give them the time, and we can continue to fight it and we're not going to walk away and abandon them, but rather give them a fighting chance to survive free and anti-communist. And he did that.

And I think it probably would have fallen anyway, but one of the reasons Vietnam fell and Cambodia had the holocaust is the fact that Congress cut off the right to bomb North Vietnam and tied the president's hands during Watergate. Now, my feeling looking back on it, shouldn't we have never gone into Vietnam? Perhaps that was the right thing. But I remember those million Catholics fled the North when we separated the two countries and the disaster would have occurred. But this was part, Tom, of an all-out global struggle in which South Vietnam was on our side and I believed had a fighting chance to survive. So I think Reagan was right when he called it a noble cause.

**WOODS:** Pat, we'll continue this conversation after we thank our sponsor.

[Sponsored content]

What is your response to people who have accused Nixon of in 1968 trying to sabotage peace talks for his own political benefit?

**BUCHANAN:** [laughing] That's Johnson, that's the argument made in the recent book by Mr. Farrell of *The Boston Globe*. My view is that clearly Nixon was miffed when he was told by LBJ at the Al Smith dinner that we're going to halt the bombing and we may put together a deal in Paris. To me, it was a stunt that LBJ was doing. Everybody would come to Paris and have the appearance that peace was at hand, and it was designed to help Humphrey who was really in a surge. And it was a phony. The idea that South Vietnam was going to accept the terms of Hubert Humphrey, bombing halt and all the rest of it, Humphrey would have walked out much quicker. So I don't believe the South Vietnamese acted based on something they were told by Nixon. They knew very well Nixon would be tougher on Vietnam because he'd been tougher in the campaign.

So were people talking about maybe this thing should blow up and all the rest of it? Probably so, but the whole thing about Mrs. Chennault and all the rest of it — I mean, the left has said Nixon stole the election because the South Vietnamese did not show up in Paris and announced they were going to not show up. But my view is they knew what they were doing. I don't know who talked to whom, but I think in my judgment all that was blown up was LBJ's PR stunt to get Hubert Humphrey with an October surprise elected. Actually, it was a November 1st surprise [laughing].

**WOODS:** Well, then there's the other accusation, which is Nixon is said to have prolonged the war and then at the end of it wound up with terms that aren't all that different from what he could have had in '68.

**BUCHANAN:** That's nonsense. Nixon in 1968, '69, Nixon sat down and he offered the North Vietnamese a real deal on the war. He was negotiating it. He pulled out 60,000 troops, I believe it was, in April of '69, and he was moving to get out of Vietnam, but the North Vietnamese would not give him anything. What we were calling for was free elections in all of Vietnam and we would abide by the results of that and all outside troops withdrawn. The truth was that the North Vietnamese, I mean, their national objective was to unite their country under Hanoi and make Saigon Ho Chi Minh City. And they were not going to give it up. And even in the four years of fighting and bombing, they didn't give up that objective and they achieved it in 1975 when Ford became president.

**WOODS:** I can't – I'm running out of time and I can't not talk about Watergate. I didn't know you testified before the Watergate Commission. You basically have been involved in every historical event of the past 50 years, it seems, reading this book. I mean, I'm interested in the fact that you almost broke with Nixon over China. The relationship seems strained at that point, and then you stayed on. Anyway, there's just so much to talk about. But on Watergate, there you have a case where people broke into the Democratic National Committee headquarters, and yet I've heard a lot of people say Nixon was so far ahead he was sure to win. He was certainly going to beat McGovern. So some people have speculated that there must be some other explanation for what they were looking for there. Have you ever credited these other theories that it was something other than what it seems on the surface?

**BUCHANAN:** I've read those, and my own belief is that it was Liddy and Hunt and the folks at the Committee to Re-Elect who had a lot of money, and they had to prove themselves – because we were actually running the campaign out of the White House [laughing], even though we're not supposed to be engaged in politics. But we were running it out of the White House, at least the strategy and the speeches and the intellectual content and the political content. And I think what it was is the folks over at the Committee to Re-Elect had all this money, and they'd sent Liddy and Hunt over there and they had this big plan to really do to the Democrats what had been done to us. I mean, Johnson in 1964 had 50 guys up at the Democratic convention wiretapping such threats to national security as Dr. King, James Farmer, and that Freedom Party in Mississippi, Fannie Lou Hamer. So I think what it was – and there's also this part about Nixon. These guys did this to me and we're going to do it to them. We're going to blaze hard and tough with them as they played with us. And that constant egging on I think had an influence with an awful lot of people. I mean, as I quote Bryce Harlow, who was a wonderful little man, about 100 pounds –

**WOODS:** My favorite quotation of the whole book I think is this one.

**BUCHANAN:** Well, that's when he said something [laughing] – "Watergate happened when somebody walked out of the Oval Office and did exactly what the president told him to do."

**WOODS:** Right, which, by the way, reminds me of what he would say – all through your book you talk about incidents where he would call you at night and say, Did you see what so and so wrote? We've got to hit back. And then the next morning, he'd say, Did you do that? Because I think maybe we should just let it go.

**BUCHANAN:** [laughing] Exactly. Often he called me, I've got one in there, he said, I want you to level – who was it? – Clark Clifford and William Fulbright, and one other – Averell Harriman in a speech. You just rip the hide off them. So I write this speech in for Agnew – I'm to write it. So I write the speech and I send it over to Haldeman for the president to read, and then the president gets the speech a couple days after he's told me to do it, and he says, The timing of this is all wrong. We don't want to be doing something like this now [laughing]. But the good news, that was – Agnew had the speech and delivered it about a month later.

So but you're right, he changed his mind, he got very passionate and upset, and he would sort of write things on his news summary and stuff. It was – I took it very

humorously. Mort Allin, I don't know if you knew him, but he ran the news summary and we would get back the news summaries with all these comments scribbled in the margins. And they were very amusing, many of them. They were, you know, "Get him," and all the rest of it.

**WOODS:** [laughing] I'm sorry, I shouldn't laugh, but I mean, I could just imagine.

**BUCHANAN:** But I mean, it was quite a place and quite a time.

**WOODS:** Is there anything Trump can learn from what you've written here about the Nixon years?

**BUCHANAN:** You know, I'm trying to – Trump and Nixon, I can't think of two more disparate characters. They both felt correctly that the media was out to get them, but Nixon I will say, despite the fact that he had me sending up letters to the editors for operations and things like that, he would not explode. He would contain and control it. I mean, he let loose in '62 at the last press conference, famously, against the press in California where he said, "You won't have Nixon to kick around anymore because this is my last press conference," but he really constrained himself. Whereas Trump tweets exactly what he thinks and believes when he thinks and believe it. So there's that difference, so I don't – and I will say, if you read the speeches we wrote on the media, I wrote on the media with some Nixon edits and Agnew edits, I mean, they're very high level speeches in my judgment. Teddy White praised them as great forensic exercises. But Trump just bashes the media, tweets "fake news" and "failing *New York Times* [laughing]."

**WOODS:** The subtlety is not quite the same.

**BUCHANAN:** [laughing] It misses the cadence and the iambic pentameter.

**WOODS:** You know, I had Roger McCaffrey over to the house not long ago because he's the godfather of a couple of our girls, and –

**BUCHANAN:** Right. He's a wonderful guy.

**WOODS:** Oh yeah, couldn't be better. And Roger and I were saying that we were reading your columns up all through 2017. A lot of them have been linked on Drudge. Drudge seems to be read by the president, at least during the campaign anyway. And I kind of speculated that your columns were kind of like memos to the president, even though you're not in the White House, and I was just saying to Roger, "I sure hope Bannon is getting those columns to Trump."

**BUCHANAN:** Well, you know, I would obviously hope that Trump had read them well, because if you took a look at Trump's campaign, and there are a lot of things in it that's sort of – and even though I'm on the right, I'm sort of a traditionalist when it comes to campaigning and there are limits to what you say and do, etc. But you tried – in looking through the basic arguments of Trump, if you extracted those paragraph by paragraph, these were very much populist, nationalist, conservative, the two combined. And to me, that is the natural alliance now, the majority alliance. It's not a

49-state alliance, but it's the natural ruling, governing alliance in the country now if Trump and the Republicans can hold it together. And those were the issues. And he was the one that was raising them. I mean, I give him credit. When he came out with "America first," I've got this piece of stained glass from the 1992 campaign one of my folks gave to me which says, "Buchanan '92: America first."

**WOODS:** Yeah, and here he was saying it taking a lot of abuse for it, and then, I don't know, so far disappointing. I'll just ask one last thing as we wrap up. In terms of his personnel, the people around him, is there anybody who fills you with confidence?

**BUCHANAN:** Well, many of them are talented people, but you know, I sort of wish he had more folks around him who were deeply steeped in the philosophy that won him the election. And I think you see a lot of folks around there, folks – I mean, basically he's got a lot of generals in there running foreign policy who are brave and heroic and patriotic but who did not dissent on these foolish wars in the Middle East the way Trump himself did. And you've got folks that are supply side economics and you've got the tax thing and you've got the contingent from Goldman Sachs, which is not a populist hangout [laughing]. So I wish he had more folks in there with him. He does have some that are both populist and conservative, because I think the combination there – it's not Paul Ryan, Paul Ryan is Jack Kemp. But it is part that and part Trump, and that to me is the winning combination.

**WOODS:** I wish he himself were more steeped in the philosophy that got him elected. Then he wouldn't have all these – it wouldn't matter who was around him.

**BUCHANAN:** Well, some of us spent 50 years steeped in the philosophy while he's been doing real estate.

**WOODS:** Yeah, exactly, exactly. You should reach out for help.

**BUCHANAN:** [laughing] He's steeped in that.

**WOODS:** That's right, that's right. Well, the book is *Nixon's White House Wars: The Battles That Made and Broke a President and Divided America Forever*, available as of today. Reading bits and pieces of your memos throughout this book is just amazing. I mean, I really feel like I've got a front seat in history reading along and getting your thoughts. It's so interesting to see Nixon saying, I wonder what Buchanan thinks about so and so. Or there was one case where some speech was before him and he said something like, By page one, it's obviously Buchanan. Like, who had written this [laughing]?

**BUCHANAN:** [laughing] [inaudible]

**WOODS:** [laughing] Yeah, it's obviously Buchanan.

**BUCHANAN:** The other guys: "Where did this speech come from? Where did this come from [laughing]?"

**WOODS:** [laughing] Yeah, come on, people. Wake up.

**BUCHANAN:** But listen, but that's – let me just – you made a couple points. Nixon was extremely astute and Nixon was aware of the changes that the Goldwater and conservative movement had made in politics. In '60 he'd made the deal with Rockefeller and the Pact of Fifth Avenue. He realized by '67, '68 that it was the right that was the real power center now in the Republican Party and if we could put together that movement, Goldwater movement with the Nixon Republicans, there's no way anybody could take the nomination away from us.

**WOODS:** Well, with that I'm going to urge people to check out – I'm going to have it on our show notes page for this episode, which I'll give you the link for in a minute after we say goodbye to Pat, but definitely grab this because it is absolutely absorbing. And the photos. The photos are fascinating. Again, you're everywhere. There's Nixon at the Great Wall of China with Pat and I can see you in this Russian hat in the background [laughing]. It's unbelievable.

**BUCHANAN:** I was dissenting on the Wall [laughing].

**WOODS:** [laughing] Yeah, exactly. All right, thanks so much, Pat. Best of luck with the book.

**BUCHANAN:** Well, thank you very much, Tom. Appreciate it.