Richard Nixon: An Insider's Account
Guest: Pat Buchanan
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Pat Buchanan, senior adviser to three presidents, was the winner of the New Hampshire primary for the Republican Party in 1996. A staple of cable news programming, Buchanan is the* New York Times *bestselling author of numerous books, most recently* The Greatest Comeback: How Richard Nixon Rose from Defeat to Create the New Majority*.

WOODS: Very good to be able to talk to you on the launch day, today. This book I just found thoroughly enjoyable. I have always thought Richard Nixon was a fascinating person just as a historical figure. In college, just on my own I read the three Stephen Ambrose volumes about Nixon. I wonder, by the way, what you thought of his take on Nixon. Do you think he was fair to him?

BUCHANAN: In many cases I think Stephen Ambrose was indeed fair to Richard Nixon, and I was mildly surprised because I did not expect it, and then frankly, I think I used one of his books myself in the one that deals with the comeback years of Richard Nixon. And there have been a number of historians and others, of course, Tom Wicker, the liberal columnist at the *New York Times.* He's mentioned in my book. We were both there at the Conrad Hilton Hotel when that explosion occurred in the street, the so-called police riot. He wrote a book entitled *One of Us* in which he suggested that Richard Nixon was actually sort of a member of the liberal group in America because of what he had done.

WOODS: Yeah, as a matter of fact, I saw Wicker speak at Harvard when I was a student. I bought his book, which he signed for me. I still thought Ambrose was a better writer.

BUCHANAN: Well, there's no question about it. Ambrose is a terrific historian.

WOODS: I want you to start off by telling people what exactly your role was with Nixon. You were a very young man, and yet your responsibilities and the sorts of things you were writing were, it seems to me, extremely important.

BUCHANAN: Well, what happened was that, of course, Nixon lost in 1960 and '62. He lost to Pat Brown. He said, gentlemen, you're not going to have me to kick around anymore. This is my

last press conference. His political career was over. He had been defeated twice. He had not won an election in his own right in a dozen years until he moved to New York as a lawyer, and then he campaigned for Barry Goldwater, and Goldwater, of course, went down to a tremendous defeat. That was the first national election, of course. I was somewhat involved in the sense I was an editorial writer supporting Goldwater in St. Louis, and then Nixon appears across the river at a fundraiser for Everett Dirksen, and so I went across the river and went up to him in the kitchen at the fundraising, and said if you're going to run in '68, I'd like to get aboard early. And he said, well, I don't have anyone with me now, but I do need someone simply for 1966, the off-year election, because if we don't pick up seats and rebuild our base—we were down to half the size of the Democratic Party in Congress—he said the nomination won't be worth anything anyhow. So I joined up with Richard Nixon, and fortunately I was the first full-time staffer other than his secretary Rosemary Woods, and the only full-time staffer he had for about 15 months all during the '66 election, and in its aftermath then we began to build up for '68. But I was right outside his office, and I pretty much did an awful lot for him, almost everything: I was his press man, I wrote his correspondence, I wrote columns with him, I helped write excerpts for his speeches, I traveled with him, and so we were very, very close. Indeed in 1967 we went over to the Middle East and we arrived in Morocco, when the Six Day War started, and he and I alone together went into Israel as two of the first Americans in there after the war was over. So we were very, very close personally, and I did an awful lot for him, as it was like an administrative assistant to a congressman who only had one person on his staff. (laughs)

WOODS: It was very interesting to me all the episodes you were involved in: you were the person who broke the news to him that Lyndon Johnson wasn't running again.

BUCHANAN: Well, exactly. I was the one that broke the news that George Romney was dropping out of the race. We were in New Hampshire, and I got word from a friend of mine, Don Oliver, I had gone to journalism school with. He was covering Romney. So we dragged Nixon into the men's room, Dwight Chapin and I, and gave him the news. Nixon didn't like to watch television of these events, and he wanted to get a read from the people who were watching it and see how they reacted, and he would respond to their reactions, very interesting in that regard. So Rockefeller drops out, and we run into his room in the suite and we told him, and he says, of course, it's the girl, because there was a rumor floating around, and more than that, a report in Drew Pearson that Rockefeller had a new girlfriend, and that would have been a disaster for him. But anyhow, the Lyndon Johnson dropout—Nixon went out to, was constant in the primary. It was the final stop in Wisconsin before the April 2nd primary, and he said, I am going to be coming back to La Guardia, and you be in the limo that picks me up with his driver, black driver there, and listen to Johnson speak on Vietnam and tell me what he says, get aboard the plane, tell me what he says so I will be able to respond to the press who would be right outside the plane at around 9:00 or 10:00 at night. So I am in that car; it's me and the driver at La Guardia at the private terminal, and we're listening to the speech and Johnson says I will not seek, and I will not accept the nomination of my party for another term. And I was jolted, and

the black driver was jolted, and then Nixon's plane rolls in, and we moved the limo down as close to the plane as we could, and I got out, and I ran to this private plane, climbed aboard, and I said Johnson's not running. And it was dramatic because it had changed the dynamic of the election entirely. We had been running against Johnson for two years, and now he was out of the race, and it was Hubert Humphrey. I was concerned about Humphrey more than any of them because Humphrey was the one individual I felt could unite the liberal wing of the party, which was antiwar, and the Johnson wing. So we drove into Manhattan talking about that all the way.

WOODS: Pat, just to clarify for my younger listeners, when you say Romney, you're talking George Romney.

BUCHANAN: (laughs)

WOODS: And you're talking about a Romney who seems to have been about as tone deaf and politically inept as his son, I'm sorry to say.

BUCHANAN: Well, I will be honest with you. After the '66 campaign, we were pretty bitter. Nixon had some advance men there, and he had some folks down deep in the law firm, and we all were at a function in '66, and after Nixon had traveled all over the country, and he had been in 80 congressional districts and 35 states, and the party had a huge victory, and *Time* and *Newsweek* had six guys on the cover, Republicans, new Republicans of the future, and Nixon was not one of them. So that's exactly right. What was now the basic question you had there?

WOODS: Well, I just wanted to clarify the identity of the Romney you were referring to.

BUCHANAN: Oh, yeah, I was getting to that. Romney came out of November of '66 far and away the front runner for the Republican nomination. He was way ahead of Nixon and Rockefeller, and Reagan was nowhere, although Reagan had just won, and he was also beating Lyndon Johnson by eight points in the national polls, and so Romney set out on a western tour to Alaska and Pocatello, Idaho, and it was the worst liftoff of any political activity since before Obamacare. It was really appalling. The press in two or three months had concluded Romney really didn't have it. He didn't know much at all about Vietnam. He got into discussions about it. He got very hot and heavy with the press, and his press was just disastrous, and for two or three months this went on until he had fallen behind Nixon in the race for the Republican nomination. Then he went on in late August, early September, I believe it was, and he went on this TV show in Michigan and Detroit, and he said, well, what happened to me when I was in Vietnam in 1965, I was brainwashed by the military and the diplomats. (laughs) And, of course, the *New York Times* picked it up about four days later and put it in the headline, and he sank 10 points further at that point, and people in his own newspaper, like the *Detroit News*, were telling him get out of the race and let Rockefeller represent the moderate Republicans against Nixon, but it was a real disaster for Romney, and I really felt sorry for him after a while. He went into New Hampshire against Nixon, and we held off going into the state until the very final day about February 1 of '68 with the election about six weeks later, and when we got in there Nixon

was way ahead, and so we just campaigned only the amount we had to do and kept going back into the state and back out, and he was campaigning his heart out, and finally he quit the race two weeks before the election.

WOODS: Now, Pat, how did Nixon do it is the question that you're trying to answer here. How did he go from losing the presidency in '60, losing the gubernatorial race in California in '62, giving that last press conference where he kicked sand in the reporters' faces? He goes from there to victory in '68. Now, of course, one of the things he does, you show the nuts and bolts hard work of the campaigns in '66. He campaigns like crazy, as you mentioned. He calls everybody on the phone whether he won or whether he lost to encourage them, and everybody kind of feels like he's in their corner and maybe they ought to be in his corner. Also, you I take as being in effect the liaison to the conservatives who didn't think Nixon was conservative enough, and you helped to pave the way for them. What else did he do to make this possible?

BUCHANAN: Well, the first thing he did, and it goes back to '64. Nixon was part of group that was looking to block Goldwater at the Cleveland Governors Conference and improve the political disaster. It backfired on him. Goldwater compared him to Harold Stassen. So Nixon picked up from there, called Goldwater's campaign, volunteered to speak at the convention after Goldwater's nomination and even introduced him. He introduced Goldwater at the convention. Goldwater gave his extremism speech. At the last, Nixon, who was outraged by that, privately campaigned all over the country for Barry Goldwater when he was deserted by Scranton, and by Romney, and by Governor Rockefeller as well, so Nixon stayed loyal. At the end of that campaign, Barry Goldwater said I am with you if you run in '68. And so when I showed up, Nixon had a real asset in Barry Goldwater, and I worked with young Tom Charles Huston on behalf, and we put together meeting after meeting with conservative leaders in 1966, conservative columnists. The whole idea, Tom, was to weld together the Nixon center of the Republican Party and the Goldwater Right, which was tremendously powerful still in the party, and had the fire and energy. As a matter of fact, I felt myself a part of that movement. I felt if we put these two blocs together, there's no way that a liberal Republican like Rockefeller or Romney could beat us if we could hold those together.

So then Nixon goes out and campaigns for every single Republican you can think of in 80 congressional districts. He had a tremendous victory. He calls all these people, and so we welded that together, and then you had the fortunate thing. Nixon told me after the election, he said, I am going to take six months from all politics, and I said, is that really smart? Romney is running ahead of us. He's ahead of us in the polls, and Nixon, who has great insight, said let 'em chew on him for a little while, which meant the press, and that's exactly what happened. And Nixon realized that once you've really gone—and he had a great confrontation with Johnson at the end of that '66 campaign where he came off best, and he realized that if he stepped out, Romney was going to get his run, but sure enough the press took him down and Nixon stayed out of the limelight very much, except for occasional appearances, the entire year 1967. So that

when he went into the campaign in ’68, it was him against Romney, and he was clearly favored, and then he had to get rid of the loser image, and he told me I am going to have to win virtually every single primary because they think I am a loser, and there’s something to that argument.

So he goes into all the primaries, and he’s got the conservatives with him. We had William Loeb of the *Union Leader* with us, and he’s got the Nixon county chairman. He was beating other Republicans by 5 to 1. Those people were very loyal to him because of all the work. He had always been out there. We’d go into places, and you know, I’ve been here four times before, and he’d gone all the way back, of course, to the late ‘40s as a major national figure. So then you get the nomination, but then, of course, you had the assassination of Martin Luther King right after Johnson dropped out four days later. You had 100 riots in American cities. You had the explosion on the Columbia campus, and Nixon began to take a very hard line, and I was writing a lot of his material on law and order, and campus anarchy, and this country coming apart, and how the judges had to be tougher. We had to be tougher on crime. So he co-opted that issue, and of course, then you had Bobby Kennedy was shot just two months after Martin Luther King, and so then I was at the Democratic Convention in Chicago where they had that riot in the street. So what happened is, and again, Nixon had no hand in this, but the cultural, moral, social, ethnic, civil rights revolution and sexual revolution—all of it was just breaking in 1968, and Nixon was seen as someone who represented traditional values in middle America and who was standing up for the silent majority against what was going on in the country. So then you get to the fall, and we not only were running against Humphrey, who was the strongest Democrat, I felt, you got George Wallace taking 21% of the national vote, taking seven southern states at one point and taking an enormous number of these Catholic conservatives whom we felt we had to win if we are going to put together a national majority, and so we ended up, we began 15 points ahead, Tom, and we ended it in a dead heat hearing the footsteps right behind us.

WOODS: Now, before I go on, Pat, I have got a bunch of things I want to ask you that I find interesting. Your take being different from the take that we would see from a lot of historians. But my listeners are just going to demand that I ask, and I am curious, the following thing. Look, we’ve now seen in the last two elections, we’ve had Mitt Romney and John McCain, who more or less are of the opinion that the conservatives have nowhere to go, and they will hem and haw but the fact is they are going to pull that lever for us, so we can kick sand in their faces. It just doesn’t matter what the conservatives want. And the result has been totally lackluster, uninspired candidacies. Now isn’t Nixon really the originator of that? The conservatives have nowhere to go. At one point in the book he says: you know, Pat, you’ve got to give the nuts 20% of what they want. Now, you know what? I’m one of those nuts, and I want more than 20%. But when I look at Nixon’s record, he said once, or probably more than once, that the U.S. economy is so strong it would take a genius to wreck it. So he wasn’t so interested or so hands-on in that. So we get affirmative action. We get the EPA. We get the wage and price controls. We get the closing of the gold window, and we almost got a guaranteed national income. What’s in the

credit column then, Pat? Could we admit that maybe this strategy doesn't work out for conservatives?

BUCHANAN: Well, there's no question about it, but Barry Goldwater was the ideal conservative. He made a number of mistakes, Tom, and I was all behind him, and there was no doubt that the country did not want Goldwater conservatives in 1964. He must have lost by 25 points and wiped out the Republican Party. Across the nation we were down to 32 Senate seats and 140 in the House. My belief, and I still think it was correct, was that Nixon, and I mainly was interested in his foreign policy, to be candid. He was much tougher during the '40s and '50s on the communists than anybody else in the Republican coalition. But there is no doubt about it that when we put together the Goldwater Right and the Nixon center in the Republican Party, we went after the socially conservative northern Catholics and the southern Protestants, as we called them then, and put together that coalition, but there's no question that when he got in, he brought into his cabinet people like Bill Rogers and George Romney and Bob Finch—he would all call them liberal Republicans. He brought Moynihan into the White House. The truth is, we did not have any people from the movement we had created and built in the early '60s who had real national experience in foreign policy or tremendous national experience in domestic policy. And so what happened was, I think, as I wrote in the book *Conservative Votes, Liberal Victories* after Nixon left we provided all the votes, and the liberals got the victories. As Hugh Scott, the Senator from Pennsylvania who was a liberal Republican and the leader of the Republicans said, the conservatives get the rhetoric, and we get the action, and so what did we accomplish?

We did put together a new majority which enabled the Republicans to capture the White House for 24 years. You did take on the national media through Vice President Agnew. Nixon did bring the troops home from Vietnam, and he did bomb Hanoi, and Haiphong, and leave every provincial capital in South Vietnamese hands. Whether you like it or not, he ended the draft, and the EPA in its early years—and quite frankly, Tom, the rivers and air were polluted horribly, and this is interstate commerce, and the feds had to deal with it some way. But wage and price control. That's all ad hockery. You are exactly right. As for closing the gold window, as I told Kemp, Jack Kemp one time: Jack, if we hadn't closed it, the Brits were coming with $3 billion dollars to clean out Fort Knox. We put all those dollars out there in the world, and all of these countries were holding them, and we were saying it's good as gold, and we will provide gold for your dollars, and some of them were saying the Americans have got so much of this paper out here I don't think it's worth dollar for dollar for the gold it says is behind it. Let's go get the gold and turn it into cash. And they were about to do that, and that's why the gold window was shut.

WOODS: No, I completely understand that. The stats have been pretty bad since 1971 in terms of debasement of the dollar and so on. There was never re-opening of the gold window, as we probably could have predicted. But anyway, that's a separate issue. I am unconvinced.

BUCHANAN: Well, let me say, when I said Tom Wicker early in the show that called him one of us, what he meant was a lot of the things Richard Nixon did we should have applauded because those were things we wanted. There's no doubt about it. He proposed the Family Assistance Plan. And we did veto the—and I have been getting some personal credit, you might call it, lately for the Child Development Act, passed by Walter Mondale up in the Senate, and we wrote a strong, conservative veto of that. But let me tell you: 1972 Buckley and Jeff Bell, and I think Jeff Hart was there, and a number of conservatives, they were known as the Manhattan 12, and they broke with Nixon and supported John Ashbrook in New Hampshire and Florida. And I remember talking to Buckley in China. We had lunch there, and I said our concern is these guys not go to California because they could have really stirred up some action there if Ashbrook could have done well. He didn't, and that might have hurt us in the fall election. But you know, Nixon and Agnew, what they did do on the cultural/social front—they did stand up against the lawlessness, the disorder, the riots, and all the rest of it. You're still not convinced.

WOODS: No, I'm still not convinced. But, of course, unfortunately I will have some listeners who will say that the very phrase law and order scares them, but when you've got cities being burned to the ground.

BUCHANAN: You have 100 cities being burned, Tom, and right after Martin Luther King was shot. Washington, D.C., my home town, Seventh Street up by Griffith Stadium burned out—14th Street burned out—federal troops in the city. In 196 when Romney is running, Detroit and Newark went up in flames. You had dozens killed and thousands arrested. The cities were on fire here, and then you had the tremendous disorders because of the antiwar movement, and you had all these other movements on the campuses. So the country was really—1968 was the most turbulent year in the 20th century I believe for the American people. The divisions were engendered in that decade that we haven't gotten past yet and never will.

WOODS: Pat, I want to shift, if I may, just to foreign policy for a bit, just the interesting thing here that I found, and perhaps I should have known this, and this is just my own ignorance, but I didn't realize that Nixon already had a plan to go to China all the way back in '67 at least. It wasn't just, as you might say, an ad hoc decision made in the middle of the war while he's in the White House. He had been thinking about it all that time. Now, would he have been thinking about that had there been no Vietnam War?

BUCHANAN: Yes. Nixon was a great believer in talking to the enemy. He was a great disbeliever in the isolation of enemies. So and he did, and I talked to—as you saw on there, I was surprised at how much I found as I went through my notes and these things popped up. Nixon's comments about China. In one of those memos he says: find out what Rockefeller is saying on China; I heard he is talking about maybe recognizing China. And we dug it up and Rockefeller hadn't gone that far, but clearly Nixon was interested in an approach to China, and I think he saw it in a Cold War context as sort of Bismarckian diplomacy that you get an opening to China, they can help us end this war, they can give us leverage against the Soviet Union, and it's a

three-way game now and why, when our adversaries, we've got two adversaries, why deny ourselves access to the weaker of the two?

WOODS: My view is the Jeffersonian one, which is that basically you look around the world, you're not going to like really any of the regimes in the world. But you have to deal with them in one way or another. So I am very glad that he did that.

BUCHANAN: I agree with that, and let me say today I would have no problem if the administration decided to send an ambassador to Tehran.

WOODS: No, nor would I. They should.

BUCHANAN: As long as they sit down, treat them with respect. You've got to talk to these people. You have to talk to your enemies in this world because in a lot of cases that's all there is out there.

WOODS: Yeah, instead, they think diplomacy is taking a bullhorn and shouting Enlightenment slogans at the other side.

All right, last thing. I thought it was very interesting the way you handled the question of the Southern Strategy. Everybody says the Southern Strategy was just a base appeal to whites, and it appealed to segregationists and so on, although, it would be hard to make that appeal with George Wallace in the race. But you make a persuasive case here that if you are really looking for strategies or candidates that were making appeals like that, look to Woodrow Wilson and Franklin Roosevelt.

BUCHANAN: Well, Woodrow Wilson and Franklin Roosevelt carried all 11 Confederate states all six times they ran. Now, how do you think they did that? How do you think Adlai Stephenson carried some deep southern states against General Eisenhower, who wiped the floor with him nationally?

WOODS: Yeah, who'd he have on the ticket?

BUCHANAN: The Democratic Party is the party of slavery, and segregation, and secession. That's the Democratic Party. Now, I will admit a couple of my grandfathers who were down in Mississippi were a part of that. But there is no doubt that the Republican Party always stood basically for an end to segregation. That was the leading party there, and as soon as you got rid of this segregation in the South, the South is conservative. It is socially, culturally, foreign policy conservative. As soon as the Democratic Party lost that hold on race, on the race issue, they lost the South. To me the Goldwater movement, or the conservative movement that I joined, was a conservative movement in terms of foreign policy and big government. It was not a segregationist movement ever.

WOODS: Now, by the way, I don't support slavery or segregation, but for the record, I do support secession.

BUCHANAN: (laughs)

WOODS: (laughs)

BUCHANAN: Listen, it got one of my great-grandfathers killed and the other one put into Camp Douglas. (laughs)

WOODS: I am not saying it was a wise move at the time. I am saying theoretically I do think there is such a right.

BUCHANAN: It seemed like a good idea at the time, Tom.

WOODS: That's right. I think it was a mistake. I actually do think it was a mistake. Listen, what do you think a historian, a fair-minded historian who is interested in Nixon reading your book would be most surprised by?

BUCHANAN: I think he's going to be most surprised at the tremendous—the patience, the perseverance, the tactical brilliance, the strategic brilliance that Nixon used to maneuver through this turbulent decade—this two-time loser, Eisenhower-era Republican with middle-class values coming through that extraordinary era from a minority party which was half as strong as the Democrats and how he made himself the President of the United States and then created a coalition that lasted for the next quarter century and dominated American politics almost as broadly and deeply at the presidential level as FDR's. And I think the man—he was an extremely intelligent man. He had some real qualities. He was patient. He took abuse, and he accepted it, and he didn't let it interfere with his program, so there's some tremendous qualities in Nixon I think that just come through when you see how he is maneuvering through these three years.

WOODS: Well, the book is *The Greatest Comeback: How Richard Nixon Rose from Defeat to Create the New Majority.* It's out today. Pat, is this the closest we're going to get to a Buchanan memoir? Because in a way it reads that way.

BUCHANAN: Well, let me say this. I wrote the book *Right From the Beginning* about growing up, and it brought me to the point of Richard Nixon, and I have offered to write the Nixon years all the way through Watergate and the White House years and the aftermath. And I am contemplating doing it, but the Lord's got a hand in that decision. (laughs) It was just a phenomenal time. And the country was going through—and Johnson and Nixon. I put those two presidencies together because both were basically broken by forces in those eras and similar forces. The American establishment frankly was in its death throes, and it brought them both down.