

The Greatest Comeback Pat Buchanan

A clear-eyed history, by a man who was there and doesn't flinch from telling the truth

This book covers the first three years of Buchanan's association with Richard Nixon, from 1965 to 1968. The opening chapter provides a bit of history leading up to that point. Nixon had been a very successful politician early in his career, elected to Congress in 1946 and to the Senate in 1950, then becoming Eisenhower's Vice President in 1952. By 1960, only 47 years old, he had gained vast exposure on the world stage traveling on behalf of the US government and the Eisenhower administration.

Despite losing the presidency, the Democrats had expanded their presence in both houses of congress and statehouses during the Eisenhower administration. Registered Democrats outnumbered Republicans by about two to one. Eisenhower, who could have run on either party's ticket, was simply not a party builder for the GOP. The lack of political infrastructure, and a consistently hostile press, were handicaps that proved impossible for Nixon to overcome.

Buchanan has some good observations on the way the campaigns were run in 1960. They involved a lot of personal appearances, as neither candidate had yet figured out how to fully leverage television. When they did, it benefited Kennedy more than Nixon as he was the more telegenic man.

Buchanan, as an editorial writer at the St. Louis Globe-Democrat, saw what few others would have imagined: that Nixon was likely to be a contender again in the 1968 elections. Quoting Oliver Wendell Holmes "It is required of a man that he should share the passion and action of his time at peril of being judged not to have lived," Buchanan approached Nixon with an offer to serve.

After losing to Kennedy in 1960, Nixon planned his comeback via the governorship of California. California politics was then as now a rather confused. As always, the press treated Nixon viciously. Unable to rally the support of the fickle California GOP establishment, the camp of Knowland, Kuchel and Earl Warren, Nixon lost to Edmund G "Pat" Brown, the father of the present Gov. Jerry Brown. After his loss, he decided to wash his hands of politics, and the press was quick to dismiss him.

Nixon moved to New York and founded the law firm of Nixon, Mudge, Rose, Guthrie and Alexander. His national and international exposure was extremely valuable for attracting clients, and the firm prospered. Practicing law, however, bored Nixon, and he kept his hand in politics. When Buchanan called, Nixon decided he could use somebody to help with the writing and the planning of his travels and appearances. He subjected Buchanan, young and not highly credentialed, to a very thorough interview before inviting him as the anchor member of his reelection team.

The substance of the book starts with the 1966 by-elections. At that point Johnson's Great Society was in full swing, programs put in place with a veto proof majority in both houses of Congress. The

Republicans were unable even to function as a loyal opposition, questioning the wisdom of Johnson's social programs or the war in Vietnam.

The Republican establishment, Nelson Rockefeller, George Romney and Jacob Javits to name three, had refused to support Barry Goldwater actively in 1964. Nixon, despite reservations about some of Goldwater's rhetoric, campaigned for him in 36 states. Though the candidate was thoroughly trounced, conservatives remembered Nixon as a loyal friend.

Again in 1966 Nixon took it upon himself to become the best-known Republican to campaign nationally on behalf of Republican candidates. He focused his efforts more on rookies, those without the advantage of incumbency, and earned a great many debts of gratitude as the Republicans gained 47 house seats in 1966.

The press did not give him credit for the success, nor did they see him shedding his loser image or reemerging as a candidate for 1968. This contented Nixon. Leaving Romney and Rockefeller to fight it out for the limelight, he was satisfied to remain in the background, continuing to do good works on behalf of the party.

The 1960s was a time of huge social issues and turmoil. While Buchanan does not dwell on the sexual and the drug revolution, he dedicates a great deal of space to discussing the antiwar movement and the race issue.

The protesters against the war behaved as though their cause was so just, that the war was so immoral, that they were justified in breaking whatever laws were necessary in their protests. I observed it as a student at Berkeley in 1964. My take at the time was that these antiwar activists did not really have a coherent point of view, that the protesters could not articulate what they were fighting against and could not talk rationally about the war. They did know that they did not want to be shot at, and powerful social trends had eroded their respect for their elders, government in general and the war effort in particular. Their opposition had been subdued when Kennedy had been President, but it blossomed when the unsympathetic Southerner Lyndon Johnson took over.

Buchanan's take at the time was authentically conservative. A society without rule of law, a society which cannot conduct arguments civilly, is not healthy whatsoever. It is a dangerous society. It was wrong to indulge the antiwar protesters, as the liberal establishment and the media did.

The same applied to violence in race questions. The liberal theory was that blacks had been held down, systematically mistreated, and now they were only demanding what was fair using the only means at their disposal. Buchanan's observation is that Blacks in America were materially better off than most peoples in the world, and were poor only in relation to whites. Moreover, Blacks had enjoyed relatively equal and open access to the benefits of American society. There were many successful Blacks that one could point to in the 1960s: US Ambassador to the United Nations Ralph Bunche, Sen. Edward Brooke, and many figures in professional sports and in business. There were, in fact, many successful blacks

even in 19th century America. It simply was untrue to say that the blacks had been oppressed to the point that they could not succeed.

The Black resistance, chronicled by Tom Wolfe in his article *Mau Mauing the Flak Catchers*, was not a just rebellion against oppression, it was a question of Blacks doing what they could get away with. My view, as a National Guard soldier, echoed those of Wolfe and Buchanan. I was driving a 2 ½ ton army truck, trying to avoid badly parked Cadillacs in Watts. The irony was striking – Cadillacs in front of single-family homes are not a symbol of a poverty-stricken society. Moreover, curiously, the businesses the Blacks burned were the very businesses that served their communities in Watts, Hunters Point, and later Washington DC. The damage they did was felt most severely by their own people. Buchanan, as a native Washingtonian, felt the injury when the Blacks in 1968 burned the seventh and fourteenth Street corridors of that city.

Buchanan quite accurately saw the Soviets as duplicitous and opportunistic. He recounts how they goaded Nasser to start a war with Israel, and then did not back him up when it blossomed into a real fight. It is exactly the same today. Putin has induced a motley collection of rebel forces to start fights in Ukraine, but seems unwilling to back up these people that he encouraged to start trouble on his behalf. As an aside, not in the book, it amazes me that Buchanan is able to claim that God is on Putin's side simply because the West has become so godless. He may recall that Hitler also claimed God. In any case, Buchanan's accurate descriptions of the Soviet activities in the 1960s are pretty much identical to what is going on in the teens of the 21st century.

[British PM Douglas-Home's] focus was on Russia's role in the recent war. The Soviets are in this thing "up to their necks," he said. They have twin goals: make Nasser dominant in the region, and, through him, gain a Soviet foothold in Africa. Asked how this affected "detente," Sir Alec said the Soviets move when they see an opportunity. They always have. Like a knife, they push ahead when they hit butter, and back away when they hit steel. Where they run into unity and strength, relations tend to improve. Soviet policy seeks "a maximum of confusion for a minimum of commitment." The Soviets did not intervene militarily in the Arab-Israeli war because they do not commit their military power far from their homeland."

Buchanan quotes Churchill as saying that "The belief that security can be obtained by throwing a small state to the wolves is a fatal delusion." That is true, and the small states currently in play are Ukraine, Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, Moldova and Ukraine. I remind Pat should he be reading this review.

This book is a satisfying read in a great many ways. Buchanan is as articulate and consistent of a conservative voice as one will find in America. It is a remarkable piece of history for him to have witnessed as a man in his late 20s. He was close to the centers of power, with keen powers of observation, and half a century later he is well served by a great memory and a great many archives to draw from. This book is altogether a five-star effort.