

How did the Republican Party become the party of Trump?

By Terry Gross

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TERRY GROSS, HOST:

This is FRESH AIR. I'm Terry Gross. How did the Republican Party become the party of Trump? That's the question that has led many Republicans to become former Republicans. It's also the question that motivated the new book "Insurgency: How Republicans Lost Their Party And Got Everything They Ever Wanted."



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Morning Edition



...r reporting on many of the events
...e New York Times and has covered
conservative media, the rise of the Tea Party, right-wing populism and the last
three presidential campaigns. He's also an MSNBC contributor. He writes, Trump
didn't bring anything inside the Republican Party that wasn't already there.
Jeremy Peters, welcome to FRESH AIR.

JEREMY PETERS: Thanks for having me.

GROSS: What do you mean when you say Republicans lost their party but got

everything they ever wanted? What do you mean by they got everything they ever wanted?

PETERS: So I thought that that was a really important way to think about why so many Republicans - Republicans who had opposed Donald Trump, insisted that they would never vote for him, came along in the end. And that's because Trump very strategically cut deals with his most important constituency, and that's the religious right. And if you look at the endgame of the Trump presidency, it's kind of hard not to see that the religious right and social conservatives got basically everything that they wanted. We're looking at a Supreme Court right now with three Trump nominees who are poised to strike down *Roe v. Wade*. And there has been no more galvanizing political effort for conservatives over the last 40 years than striking down *Roe v. Wade*.

So I think if you are one of those voters, if you're one of those activists - and I interviewed many of them for this book - that allows them to see past the ugliness of Trumpism. It allows them to see past January 6, frankly. And I posed that question to a lot of these folks as I reported the book in its final phases. I said, you know, looking at what we saw happen, Trump supporters ransacking the Capitol, threatening to execute the vice president, as you watched that, did you think to yourself, this is all worth it? And frankly, most of them, if not all of them, said, yes, it was.

GROSS: So they got Supreme Court justices, a big majority on the Supreme Court, the possibility of doing away with *Roe v. Wade*. What else do you think social conservatives got through the bargain with Trump?

PETERS: Well, it's not just social conservatives, although that's a huge piece of this. I mean, you have gun rights activists who are emboldened right now. You have, you know, people who are concerned with more esoteric notions of deregulation and shrinking the power that government bureaucrats have. And the Supreme Court is certainly stacked for them at this point. But social

conservatives, importantly, didn't just gain seats on the Supreme Court. What they gained was a kind of like social and political cachet that they didn't have in the Republican Party before Trump.

And that's because Donald Trump didn't really know any better. He didn't practice politics as usual. He didn't talk the same way around sensitive issues like abortion as a Mitt Romney or George W. Bush would and kind of tiptoe around it. Donald Trump was the first Republican presidential nominee to say, I will appoint justices that will overturn Roe v. Wade. And that really emboldened the social right in a way that we hadn't seen before.

GROSS: I want to get back to something you say in the book, which is that Trump didn't bring anything to the Republican Party that wasn't already there. Is that really still true? Did the Republicans in the past try to overturn an election or justify an insurrection and, you know, describe it as people posing as Trump supporters or looking like tourists, you know, in the Capitol? That seems kind of unprecedented.

PETERS: Oh, that - so yes. The violence, of course, that we saw on January 6 with the insurrection is, of course, unprecedented. What I lay out in the book is an argument for how the seeds for that insurrection were always there because the modern history of the Republican Party has always been one of insurgency and revolt. And the Republican establishment until 2016 always had the upper hand in quelling those revolts. But you can go back, you know, as recently as 2012 and see the beginnings of an alternate reality taking shape. And this is kind of what I describe in the chapter about Romney's loss and his relationship with Roger Ailes and Fox News.

And what was happening there was the beginning of a denial of Republicans' unpopularity with voters. They couldn't accept the fact that they were losing at the ballot box, so they started to invent reasons for that loss that had nothing to do with the truth, that the Democrats were stealing it, that the polls were wrong.

People believed this. They believed that the polls were wrong - of course, they weren't. And Obama won his second term. But what happens right after that? People like Donald Trump come out and say it was because of fraud. Roger Ailes has a meeting with Mitt Romney in his hotel suite in Central Park South a few weeks after the election and says, don't worry, it's not your fault, Mitt. The Democrats, they always cheat.

So this notion that Republicans only lose because Democrats are somehow pulling a fast one or are corrupt has always been there. But the ugly, violent manifestation of it on January 6 is definitely unprecedented. Now, whether that is the middle of this story or the end of this story, I don't know. But I would say that the way that former President Trump continues to embolden these lies and to defend the rioters, saying that some of them deserve pardons, suggests to me that this is not the end of the story.

GROSS: You know, at the same time, I think it's in 2013 when Reince Priebus is asked to basically write an autopsy about what's gone wrong with the Republican Party. And one of his conclusions is we have to be more inclusive and, you know, encourage, you know, DREAMers to get citizenship. And, of course, Trump takes things in exactly the opposite direction.

PETERS: Yes, he does. I go through numerous examples in the book about the way that Ari Fleischer, the former George W. Bush press secretary, and other Republicans who are of the Bush wing of the party, really worked hard to talk to Hispanics, Asians in producing this autopsy report because they wanted to understand the GOP's deficiencies in minority communities.

So they do this groundwork. They put it in a report and recommend basically a vision for the Republican Party. That sounds like one that's entirely compatible with a diversifying country. The problem is that was not where Republican primary voters wanted to go. And the conservative activists who often, you know, whip up enthusiasm with those grassroots voters and are very influential in Republican

primaries took the autopsy as an affront, as another example of the Republican Party establishment trying to silence their voices and push them aside. And that resulted in the kind of upheaval that you saw eventually culminate with Donald Trump, who I think ultimately, as the book argues, is a reaction to the decades-long effort of Republican leaders in Washington trying to avoid sharing power with the conservative grassroots and insurgent Republicans.

GROSS: Let's take a break here, and then we'll talk some more. If you're just joining us, my guest is Jeremy Peters, author of the new book "Insurgency: How Republicans Lost Their Party And Got Everything They Ever Wanted." We'll be right back after a break. This is FRESH AIR.

(SOUNDBITE OF AMY RIGBY SONG, "PLAYING PITTSBURGH")

GROSS: This is FRESH AIR. Let's get back to my interview with Jeremy Peters. He's a correspondent for The New York Times and author of the new book "Insurgency: How Republicans Lost Their Party And Got Everything They Ever Wanted."

What are some of the roots that you see in earlier movements or earlier individual leaders that - you know, that precede Trump but help lead to Trump? I mean, how far back do you go? How far back do you think that goes?

PETERS: Right. Well, this is always tricky 'cause we could be having, you know, a conversation from Barry Goldwater to Sarah Palin to Donald Trump. (Laughter) And we don't have nearly enough time to do that today. But where I start in the book is chronologically with Pat Buchanan in 1992. Pat Buchanan's presidential campaign that year against the sitting Republican president, George H.W. Bush, really was the canary in the coal mine for establishing the weaknesses that a low-tax, low-spending economic conservative, a robust military, a Republican president had with your average voters. I mean, the fact is, looking back now, there's very little constituency outside of the Republican donor class for somebody who wants to cut taxes for corporations and deregulate. That's just not

a populist message. It's not a winning electoral message.

But what Pat Buchanan figured out in 1992 was a couple of things, and I think a lot of them have been lost in our memory about what Buchanan meant to people. We tend to associate him with the kind of America First policies that Donald Trump popularized in 2016. But while Buchanan did that, part of what he explained to me and what he wrote in this unpublished memoir that he provided to me as I was researching the book is there was always a racial element to Buchanan's appeal. And by that, I mean he told me that the reason he got into the race against George H.W. Bush was because of affirmative action.

George Bush had supported an affirmative action law that really angered conservatives, and that was the last straw for Buchanan. So what that shows you is that there has always been a type of voter who, let's say, at the time, bristled at the fact that they had to press one to hear English when they dialed an automated number. Or they were angry that their kid got denied a slot at a competitive college, and they blamed affirmative action for that. Buchanan saw all of that and took advantage of that in a way that endeared him to the kind of voter who would become Trump's voter.

GROSS: Does he have any regrets about having, in his own way, set the stage for Trump?

PETERS: No. I would say, in fact, it's exactly the opposite. I think he takes a certain pride in seeing that somebody was able to succeed where he failed. I don't think that he expected Trump to win a second term very much for the reasons that he claimed to support a more restrictive immigration policy. He just didn't think that there were enough white voters in the country left to reelect someone like Trump.

GROSS: Let's talk a little bit about the Tea Party. You covered that, you know, insurgency movement. I mean, these were people who are coming into office in Congress determined to change the way Congress works and what the priorities were. Just give us a brief refresher of what the Tea Party stood for.

PETERS: So it's impossible to have a conversation about what the Tea Party was without talking about what President Obama meant to a lot of the demonstrators who joined all those rallies in 2009 and 2010. This was very much an anti-Obama movement, and it was a reaction to the feeling among a lot of Americans that they were, quote-unquote, "losing their country." And this has always been a rallying cry for the American right and why, in many respects, the Tea Party was not a unique phenomenon, just like Trumpism was not necessarily unique at its core. It represents a fear that many Americans have long held, that they are one presidential election away from losing their purchase on cultural and political power in this country.

GROSS: So an example of two Tea Party people that are going in opposite directions now - you have Kevin McCarthy, who is the House minority leader and has very much gone for supporting Trump. And then you have Adam Kinzinger, who's now on the January 6 committee, and it's very much about investigating Trump and looking into, you know, what happened on January 6. And you describe in your book on how January 6, Kinzinger, who had been in the military, actually had a gun with him legally and, you know, had taken it out, expecting he might actually need to use it because things had gotten so violent. Am I misrepresenting that at all?

PETERS: No, that's exactly what happened. Adam Kinzinger here, a military veteran, somebody who had earlier, before he became a politician, chased down a criminal in downtown Milwaukee who had slashed a woman and pinned him to the ground until police came - I mean, you're not talking about a guy who is a shrinking violet by any stretch. And he's so afraid for his family, for his staff's safety, he tells his wife, stay home on January 6, even though his wife wanted to come and watch this historic certification vote. He tells his staff not to come in. And when he senses things are getting ugly, goes back into his office across the street from the Capitol, barricades himself inside and takes out his pistol.

And that is the experience that I think a lot of us would have expected to shape -

since most of these Republicans experienced the same type of violence, they witnessed it firsthand the same way that Adam Kinzinger did. I think we would have expected more people to react like him, that the threat to their lives, the feeling that they were going to be overrun and possibly even killed by members of this mob, that that would have finally been the last straw that so many people were looking for in terms of when Republican support would finally break with Trump.

But, in fact, the opposite happened because you take the experience of someone like Adam Kinzinger and then compare it to somebody like Kevin McCarthy. In the hours after the attacks and during the attacks, we know Kevin McCarthy was pleading with President Trump to call off the rioters. Then, when President Trump is impeached, Kevin McCarthy gives a very impassioned speech, saying that while he opposes impeachment, he still thinks Trump should be censured and that Trump ultimately bears responsibility for the attack.

Well, a few weeks later, that is essentially wiped from McCarthy's memory and wiped from the collective memory of most of the Republican Party in Washington. And that's how you get to a point where the Republican National Committee passes a resolution saying that the January 6 demonstrations represented legitimate political discourse.

GROSS: So, Jeremy, your book emphasizes the role of Sarah Palin in kind of setting the table for Donald Trump. What do you think she represented in Republican politics that was new?

PETERS: As somebody said to me, Palin is very much the tip of the spear of the Trump movement. And that's true in many ways, starting with the fact that she was completely misunderstood and underestimated by the Republican establishment. Palin also was crucial because it wasn't just what the Republican establishment failed to see in her, it was what voters would see in her and how her experience was shaped by feeling like the people like George Bush and Mitt Romney didn't

respect her. There's this formative episode that I describe here where Palin adopts this mantle of, quote, unquote, "valley trash," and that's a reference to where she lived and had grown up in Alaska, this place called the Mat-Su Valley that wasn't as economically prosperous as Anchorage, and people elsewhere in Alaska kind of looked down on folks from the valley.

Well, Palin takes that and adopts that nickname as a badge of honor, almost as, you know, she's proud to be valley trash. And that was very much a precursor to the type of slur like deplorable that you heard the Trump people adopt. It was as if they thrived on this notion that elites look down on them. And no one channeled that more effectively than Sarah Palin.

But, of course, she didn't do this on her own. And that's what I think we misunderstand about Sarah Palin's legacy - is that while she had these grievances that she was very effective in voicing, she did so because she had a script that was written for her by the McCain campaign. She didn't write her own speeches. She didn't come up with a lot of these ideas. As I get into, one of those infamous lines that she ever uttered during that campaign, saying that President Obama - then-Senator Obama was, quote, "palling around with terrorists," she didn't come up with that. That was inserted into her speech by people at McCain campaign headquarters. So...

GROSS: And can I just say I was shocked to read that?

PETERS: Yeah.

GROSS: I was shocked to read that McCain's people wrote something as radical as that. I remember during like, one of McCain's speeches or rallies, a woman in the audience said that Obama was a Muslim. And McCain was really taken aback hearing that and, you know, very politely corrected the woman and said that Obama wasn't a Muslim. But by saying that, you know, Obama's palling around with terrorists, the subtext of that opens the door to all kinds of fears about who Obama really is.

PETERS: It's very ugly. And that's the moment when McCain starts to see this all getting away from him. And they fail to take into account that that was a possibility all along, that by inflaming these passions, these prejudices, that they would have a real mess on their hands and that, in fact, Sarah Palin would become more popular than John McCain with many Republican voters. I mean, her rallies during that campaign were larger than his. He would bring her to his events so he could draw 10,000, 12,000, 15,000 people. And on an ordinary day, he would get only a fraction of that.

GROSS: Let's take a short break here, and then we'll talk some more. My guest is Jeremy Peters. He's a correspondent for The New York Times and author of the new book "Insurgency: How Republicans Lost Their Party And Got Everything They Ever Wanted." We'll be right back. I'm Terry Gross, and this is FRESH AIR.

(SOUNDBITE OF JULIAN LAGE'S "THE RAMBLE")

GROSS: This is FRESH AIR. I'm Terry Gross. Let's get back to my interview with Jeremy Peters, a correspondent for the New York Times and author of the new book "Insurgency: How Republicans Lost Their Party And Got Everything They Ever Wanted." Peters wrote the book after reporting on many of the events that led to President Trump. He's covered conservative media, the rise of the Tea Party, right-wing populism and has covered three presidential campaigns. He's also an MSNBC contributor.

We've been talking about Sarah Palin. So do you see Palin as freely dispensing misinformation during the campaign, also helping open the door to Trump's massive misinformation?

PETERS: Yes. What you see after Sarah Palin becomes a political figure in her own right after the election is she uses social media to propagate misinformation about President Obama in a way that no other Republican figure was doing so recklessly at the time. And the biggest example of that is her use of the phrase death panels, which she brings into the American political lexicon. That is solely

on her. And...

GROSS: This was her accusation about Obamacare, that it would lead to death panels, where people would decide whether your loved one was allowed to be treated or whether they would just die.

PETERS: Exactly. And she claimed wrongly and stuck to her guns when she was called out on it that these panels of government bureaucrats would be deciding whether or not somebody should receive health care under Obama's law. And what was so interesting to me as I reported the book is the origins of that. It was completely spontaneous and all Sarah Palin. She wrote it up in the draft of a Facebook post, included this phrase, death panels, which she forwarded on to her speechwriter. And her speechwriter took a look at it, thought it was too incendiary and deleted it.

And Sarah Palin saw the revision, went back to her speechwriter and said, no, no, no. I want this in there because she was mistakenly under the belief that her child with Down syndrome might be the kind of person who is denied care under this health care law. And in that moment, you can see taking shape this world within the Republican Party, where if a fact is salacious and demonizes your enemy, even if it's not true, it becomes too good to fact check. And it becomes part of their reality.

GROSS: After McCain and Palin lost the election, Palin became a Fox contributor. And, you know, Ailes was very encouraging of that. You report on a one-on-one meeting that she had with Ailes, in which she emerged from the meeting pale and said, I'm never meeting alone with that man again. I had not seen that reported anywhere else. Did you break that story? And are you implying that Ailes behaved in a sexually inappropriate way?

PETERS: So as far as I know, that has not been reported anywhere else. And the reason I found that story so interesting is because it really complicates the picture of Sarah Palin a lot of people have in their minds. My source for that couldn't be

quite sure exactly what happened to her in the office, only that Ailes insisted Palin come in alone. And when she came out, whatever happened inside there clearly made her deeply uncomfortable. I think that Sarah Palin is often seen as somebody who acted, you know, through her own agency and ambition, and in doing so, lowered the bar for what was acceptable political rhetoric and said some ugly things, spread things that were not true about President Obama and really kind of acted on her own.

But it's also true that she was manipulated by a lot of these Republican men, that, you know, whether it was, you know, Roger Ailes, who it appears behaved inappropriately toward her, or whether it was, you know, something less insidious, like the McCain campaign writing into her scripts language that was very provocative and borderline inappropriate and offensive. There were people calling the shots for her, people who had power over her, who were not treating her well, who were disrespectful.

GROSS: She hasn't been on the national stage very much lately or in the past few years, for that matter. But she's back on it because of a lawsuit against your newspaper, The New York Times, which she's charging with defamation. Do you want to describe what the lawsuit is about?

PETERS: So Palin is claiming that The New York Times defamed her because in an editorial published in 2017, there was an erroneous reference that the paper later corrected to her inciting the shooting in Tucson in 2011 that gravely wounded Gabby Giffords and killed several others. It's an unusual case, (laughter) and not only because it's unusual for me to be covering a lawsuit against my employer. But it's unusual because news organizations don't usually take cases like this - or allow cases like this to get to trial. Usually, they settle. And the reason they do that is because the discovery process can be very messy. And it shows, you know, the internal workings of how story decisions get made. And, you know, Palin's argument, which is - it's a very high legal bar to reach, ultimately, but one in which legal experts say is not out of the realm of possibility for a jury to agree

with her - is that she has to prove that the Times acted with reckless disregard for the truth and malice. And that's what will be in front of the jury.

GROSS: If The New York Times loses, that will be the first time in 50 years that they've lost, you know, a defamation suit. Do you - I should say here, one of the early statements and recurring statements that Trump made - and of course, as we all know, Trump was very anti-mainstream media - was that, like, we should change the libel laws because, you know, the media is getting away with murder. They're telling all these lies. And we have to prevent that from happening. So her suit is, you know, intentionally or unintentionally, carrying out some of the Trump agenda that he never succeeded in carrying out.

PETERS: Oh, that's exactly right. And legal experts who've looked at this case say that ultimately that is the endgame of a lot of lawyers who would like to see the First Amendment protections afforded to the media and cases like New York Times v. Sullivan eroded. They want those scaled back. And, you know, there's no question that that's what Sarah Palin's lawyers intend to pursue here.

GROSS: Well, let's take a short break. Then we'll talk some more. If you're just joining us, my guest is Jeremy Peters, author of the new book "Insurgency: How Republicans Lost Their Party And Got Everything They Ever Wanted." We'll be right back. This is FRESH AIR.

(SOUNDBITE OF THE AMERICAN ANALOG SET'S "IMMACULATE HEART 2")

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Let's talk some more about Roger Ailes and Fox News. Trump, in a way, first strengthened and then, in some ways, weakened Fox News because - in a way, you can argue that Ailes lost control of Trump and that Trump was so far to the right that this whole other constellation of very, very, very far-right media, you

know, got built around Trump, taking viewers away from Fox News. Is that something that Ailes didn't see coming, and did he live long enough to realize what was happening?

PETERS: There are signs that he did know toward the end just how destructive Trump could be to the Fox brand. And you saw that with how fiercely Trump and his allies, especially at Breitbart, came after Megyn Kelly during the debate where she, you know, famously put him on the spot about calling women fat dogs and pigs. And one of the scenes I have in the book is with Ailes complaining to one of the network personalities that he hates it when Donald Trump calls him. He says, you know, I hate it when he calls me. He talks to me like I talk to you. He cuts me off. He doesn't let me finish my sentences. I can't stand it. So there was an awareness that Ailes had about how letting Trump inside ultimately could be, you know, like unleashing a tiger. But he didn't see it soon enough, and he failed, really, to do enough about it once he did see that.

And that is basically the same situation that the Republican Party found itself in once Donald Trump became president. They assumed that this was somebody who would be good for the party, and it was with voters, just like it was good for Roger Ailes with his audience. It grew the base of support for both the Republican Party and Fox News. But ultimately, what they both realized too late was that empowering somebody like that, who has no loyalty to anybody but himself and somebody for whom political survival is at the front of his mind always and - regardless of who he has to run over in the process, there's just no doing business with someone like that.

GROSS: Someone who could kind of see the direction that part of the Republican base was heading in was a pollster named Tony Fabrizio. And he worked for several Republican candidates over the years. He identified what he described as Dennis Miller Republicans - this was years ago - like, people who just - like, fueled by anger, and they wanted a candidate who was fueled by anger, too. But more recently, he identified what he calls InfoWars Republicans. Describe who they are

and how much of the base Fabrizio thinks they're part of.

PETERS: It's a significant percentage. He found that we're talking about 10% of the Republican electorate. That's 10% of the Republican electorate that believes in several - not just one QAnon conspiracy theory, but several. And this survey was fairly exhaustive, in my understanding of it. The respondents were read from a list of various conspiracy theories that QAnon followers believe in. And in order to be catalogued in this survey as an InfoWars Republican, as Fabrizio described them, you had to believe in a number of these, not just one. And so that's what makes that 10% figure so startling.

GROSS: Do you think that we now have InfoWars congressmen?

PETERS: I think one of them is a leader of the party - Marjorie Taylor Greene. I think the question there is whether or not somebody like Marjorie Taylor Greene is more representative of the Republican base now than Donald Trump is. Marjorie Taylor Greene appears on Steve Bannon's podcast regularly, and she has a saying that she likes to use. I am the voter. Now, she's not every voter in the Republican Party, of course, but she represents an awful lot of voters. And these are voters who are just so angry at what they see happening around them, so angry about their loss of cultural and social and political status in the country that they believe in things that are demonstrably false because they feel good.

And the theme - the whole theme of this book is the way that the Republican Party has let in these destructive elements over the years and empowered them to their detriment and whether or not Donald Trump ultimately is one of those Republicans. Even though he came in as the outsider who was smashing the status quo, it's not unthinkable to me that a figure like Marjorie Taylor Greene and the voters she represents decide that they've had enough of Trump someday. I don't know if that happens, of course, when that happens. But that's, you know, one of the many reasons why I think my book may only be at the middle point of this story rather than the end.

GROSS: Yeah. Well, your book is really the story of every time the Republican Party lets in somebody from the far right, the party moves even further right than that person who they let in, and that person is often, like, old news and, you know, passe because they've been outrighted by the next group or the next person who comes along. And you're suggesting that that might be happening to Trump right now.

And I've been reading about how in some ways the Republican Party is moving beyond Trump further to the right and that they don't necessarily need him anymore, that his followers have their own thing going and they don't necessarily need him to lead them. And you could also argue that even some of the people in the very far right see Trump as a liability because he's legally liable in ways now. And, you know, there's the January 6 investigations. So how far do you think it's gone so far in Trump's own followers, both in the party leadership and voters, who have moved beyond Trump?

PETERS: I think the real risk there for Trump is what you just identified. It's that his voters no longer see him as good for them. He's in this for himself. And he didn't have that problem in 2015, '16, and even in 2020. His appeal to them was, I am fighting for you. I am your voice. But now Donald Trump sounds more like he's his own voice, that he is avenging what he considers to be this grave injustice of the 2020 election. And, you know, don't get me wrong. While there are an awful lot of Republicans - you know, two-thirds of the party by some measures - who believe that fraud impacted the election in a significant way and they, you know, they don't consider Biden a legitimate president, that's not necessarily something that is going to drive voters to the polls come 2024 if Trump runs.

And the risk to me seems to be that he makes this so much about himself. And Trumpism has always been, you know, a cult of personality. But there's a limit to that when people start to see that he's not delivering anything for them because regardless of whatever policies he passed and how effective studies have shown they truly were, like the tax cuts in improving people's bottom lines, at least

during the Trump years, people - his supporters felt like the country was a better place and it was more prosperous and that he was helping them. I don't know how long they continue to believe that if he appears to be in this only to help himself.

GROSS: Jeremy Peters, thank you so much for talking with us.

PETERS: Thank you, Terry.

GROSS: Jeremy Peters is a correspondent for The New York Times and author of the new book "Insurgency: How Republicans Lost Their Party And Got Everything They Ever Wanted." After we take a short break, TV critic David Bianculli will review the new series "Pam & Tommy," about Pamela Anderson and Tommy Lee and how their private sex tape was stolen and put on the internet. This is FRESH AIR.

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