

>> Welcome to Uncommon Knowledge. I'm Peter Robinson.

>> And I'm Christopher Buckley.

>> You just behave for a moment. Formerly chief speech writer for then vice president George H. W. Bush, Christopher Buckley is now editor at large of Forbes Life magazine. Mister Buckley, which is, this is the last time I'm calling you mister, so enjoy it, is the author of thirteen books, including the comic novels, Little Green Men, Boomsday, and Thank You For Smoking. The man Tom Wolf has called quote, one of the funniest writers in the English language, close quote, has just published a new comic novel.

>> Could you hold that up a little more prominent, closer to -

>> Tighten in on it.

>> Let's come in tight on the book.

>> Supreme Courtship. Segment one, how he does it. From the dust jacket of Supreme Courtship, I quote. President of the United States, Donald Vander Kamp is at war with Capitol Hill after his supreme court nominee is nixed for insufficiently appreciating To Kill a Mockingbird. The president chooses someone so beloved by voters that the senate won't have the guts to reject her. Judge Pepper Cartwright, the star of the nation's most popular reality show, Courtroom Six, close quote. Christopher Buckley, how do you come up with this stuff?

>> Well how did Mozart come up with his symphonies? How did Bach come up with his partidas [assumed spelling]? How does one analyze genius? It's beyond me. Well if you, you know, if you stare at the monthly mortgage statement long enough, this is surely where inspiration comes from.

>> Now I have a couple of questions here, and I'm going to cling to the -

>> These are I hope substantive -

>> They are substantive, yes.

>> - elevated. Because I am a -

>> I cling to them as to a lamp post in a gale. Do you start with character or plot? Now I'll just sit back and let you -

>> I start by asking my publisher for money, as much of it as I can get. I say how much will you give me? And if you give me a lot of money, I shall give you a good book. But sir, if you offer me very little money I will give you not a very good book. I you know, I wanted to write a book about the supreme court. I've done a bunch of Washington institutions. I've written novels about the White House, the state department, the you

know, CIA, FBI, NASA. I'm starting to run out of Washington institutions, so I thought the supreme court, you know, why not?

>> Do your ideas, sort of semi-serious question here. Do your ideas sort of stack up like planes on the runway? Michener wrote someplace, somewhere that he had never failed mid-way through one project, suddenly to have a clear idea about what the next project would be. Is that the way it works with you? Or do you have blank spaces.

>> No, I find, I'm not a very big thinker, intellect. I take them one at a time. James Michener, by the way, I once read, and I don't want to spend too much time on Michener, cause I think this show should be about me.

>> It should be about you of course, yeah.

>> But James Michener used to read as research for his books, up to six hundred books, and he took no notes, he had a photographic memory. Anyway. I of course for this book -

>> He produced prose so inspiring -

>> I read -

>> - he's offered a reward to anyone who could persuade him to stop writing. Do you remember that famous review in National Review?

>> Yes I do, yes I do. But old Michener also gave us as a last line to one of his novels, a line that President Ronald Reagan used to quote copiously. Can you tell me for the extra point, you sir, having been a Ronald Reagan speech writer -

>> Yes.

>> - what the line was, and what book it came from.

>> I have no idea. I don't even have to listen to the whole Jeopardy ditty. I have no idea.

>> Where do we get such men.

>> That's Michener?

>> The last line of The Bridges at Toko-Ri.

>> Ahh.

>> And a line favored by Ronald Reagan.

>> I am going to force you to answer -

>> But enough about Michener.

>> Yes, back to you. I'm going to force you to answer just one question about method. On the one hand we have Agatha Christie and P.G. Woodhouse. Well Agatha Christie's pro, we'll just say P.G. Woodhouse, and this is to flatter you enormously of course. But not unduly.

>> I'm frequently -

>> P.G. Woodhouse -

>> to Agatha Christie. We had the same hair.

>> Plotting in detail before you started. On the other hand we have your father, who always at least claimed that he simply sat down and started writing. No plotting at all, which, what's your -

>> Yeah, I think I read that book.  
[ laughter ]

>> Is that the one about Elvis?

>> I am a, I'm a plotter, I'm a plotter. I like to, in my youth, which is long ago, although you knew me then -

>> [inaudible].

>> - I had, when I had the confidence of my inability I would you know, I would, writing a novel I would see a door marked come on down here, this is very promising, do not drive away. And then seventy five pages, hundred pages later, see a sign that said dead end, fooled you. So throw out those hundred pages. Now I'd like to have, I'd like to have more of a blueprint.

>> Segment two.

>> It's a very technical process. Highly technical.

>> Segment two. Supreme Courtship. I take this to be largely a book about the media, that's sort of the next level down of it, right? Characterization, belly laugh, belly laugh, Washington institution.

>> Insert belly laugh here.

>> Yes. So let me set this up by saying when you and I worked in the Reagan White House, David Gergen [assumed spelling], the director of communications -

>> Do you mean the man that Andrew Ferguson referred to as a goggle eyed melon head?

>> I mean that very man actually, yes I do.

>> Not that I subscribe to that.

>> If you intend to force me to defend David Gergen, I refuse sir. I will not rise to that one.

>> There are some things I shall not do, sir.

>> All right. But David Gergen had in his office the television set that had been made for Bob Haldeman [assumed spelling], and it contained three screens, a big one and two little ones, so the director of communications could watch all three evening newscasts at the same time. Today, the world of Supreme Courtship. Cable channels, talk radio, the internet, and a pervasive feeling of madness. You've got one of your lead characters, Senator Dexter Mitchell wants to run for president, decides actually what he'll do is resign from the senate and play the president on a television program.

>> Mm-hmm, it's called POTUS [assumed spelling].

>> POTUS, yes.

>> POTUS, and we know what POTUS stands for. I've always thought POTUS, which is of course the acronym -

>> It's an ugly word, I've never liked it.

>> It's the acronym for president of the United States, and you and I know that on the schedules we'd get you know -

>> Right.

>> The internal schedule would say you know, POTUS 302 meets with Miss Congeniality in Rose Garden. I've always thought POTUS would be a good name for an erectile dysfunction. Don't you think?

[ laughter ]

Potos. It's ready when you are. But seriously. I came here because I was told this was -

>> We have a standard -

>> - this was a serious television. We're on the Stanford campus, I was expecting you know, frankly something a little more intellectually -

>> Has the rise of -

>> I mean I'll go wherever you want to go.

>> Has the rise of the new media been good or bad for the political life of this republic?

>> Didn't Tom, wasn't it Tom Wolf who came up with the term the billion footed beast, to describe the media? It may not have been Wolf, but he's clever, so let's ascribe it to him. I think it's become a bit of a billion footed beast, the new media. It's dizzying. I mean I grew up in the age, I am, not that I want to give away my age, and I don't think, I think I've aged rather gracefully. All of this makeup that these gentlemen applied to me before the show has been very helpful. I grew up in a time where there were three channels, CBS, NBC, and then a new fangled channel came along -

>> Yes.

>> - called ABC.

>> I [inaudible] when ABC was new.

>> Do you remember? They said I give it six months.

>> Right.

>> Like it's a fad, we only need two networks. And then there was, then channel thirteen, or UHF.

>> Educational television.

>> And you had to attach a funny looking antenna to the back of your TV that was round, and you know, mom would wiggle it, and or dad would wiggle it while mom said no no, I still can't make anything out. So there were, it was a simpler age, and there was, in the afternoons there was the thud of the newspaper on the porch, and that was you know, the afternoon paper. Now we have what, you know, Keith Oberman [assumed spelling]. May I say something about Keith Oberman?

>> Please.

>> He reminds, Keith Oberman puts me in mind of a doctor who has just told you that you have six months to live, and then checks his watch, and says I got to go.

[ laughter ]

I've always wanted to say that on TV, and now -

>> You've done it.

>> - now I've -

>> You've lived in Washington. You moved to Washington in eighty one to go to work for George H. W. Bush?

>> I moved to Washington during the Coolidge administration.

>> Right, exactly.

>> It was longer, a little bit before your time.

>> So, all right, so you -

>> 1981.

>> Do you have the -

>> A historical perspective?

>> Well no -

>> Yes. I have a number of things.

>> Are you one of these people who says Washington is deranged. It's not like the good old days. This media churn, this constant media frenzy, it's a debased place by comparison with the Washington that I knew, when Ronald Reagan and Tip O'Neil would sit down over a snort.

>> Well.

>> So, there's something to that, is there not?

>> Yeah, no there is. I mean remember these, you and I worked in an administration led by this genial Irishman named Dutch. And he and Tip O'Neil, who was speaker of the house, would scream at each other all day, and call each other frightful names, you know, you heartless old swine who doesn't care about widows and orphans. And Reagan would return the favor by saying you know, he was destroying the economy. And then they would you know, they'd sit down and, over bourbons, and tell jokes. That doesn't happen anymore, and that's, I like gridlock. In a nutty world I'm all, the thing I most fear about this coming election is that we're gonna end up with sixty senators in one party. There I think things could go very badly. No it's, let's face it, it's not a very congenial environment.

>> All right, segment three. Speech. Let me read you a few passages.

>> You'll be quoting from some of my more famous speeches.

>> Read the -

>> We have nothing to fear but fear itself.

>> Yes.

>> Yeah, right, right. Love that, that was one of my favorites.

>> I'll read you a few passages.

>> You a former speech writer, you hired me.

>> Okay.

>> Speech writer's talking about speeches.

>> All right.

>> And to calibrate the grading system here, I'll give you what we'll both agree I think should be ten out of ten. With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, close quote.

>> Lincoln's second inaugural, hundred and forty one words. Second best speech ever given in America.

>> Second best. All right. Sucker that I am.

>> First best? Fore score and seven years ago.

>> Ah all right, okay. Right.

>> Fair enough?

>> Right, right, right. Okay. All right, so we'll take a, it's ten out of ten?

>> Let's make the [inaudible] standard, sure.

>> All right. Barac Obama. And I'll just go through, okay? And I've done I think a fair job here of taking a passage from each candidate.

>> This is non-partisan.

>> Yes, exactly.

>> We're not grading -

>> We're grading the rhetoric.

>> Rhetoric, right.

>> I don't fit the typical pedigree, and I haven't spent my career in the halls of Washington. But I stand before you tonight, his acceptance speech, because all across America something is stirring. What the nay sayers don't understand is that this election has never been about me, it's about you, close quote.

>> I'm not gonna give that very high marks. It's hard to imagine anyone quoting that fifty years from now. I would, on a scale of one to ten, two.

>> Two. Does it strike you as solipsistic that the very, anybody who says it's not about me, it's about you really means it's about me.

>> Well it's rhetorical pandering. I mean this is about you? I mean that's something you'd expect, that's something I would expect to hear on you know, Oprah -

>> Right, okay.

>> - or Regis, and what's her name, Repa.

>> Joseph Biden. Quote, almost every night I take the train home to Wilmington.

>> I love this.

>> As I look out the window at the homes we pass, you can hear the train clickety click, clickety click, I can almost hear what they're talking about at the kitchen table. Should mom move in with us now that dad is gone. Fifty, sixty, seventy dollars to fill up the car? Winter's coming, how are we gonna pay the heating bills? Another year and no raise? That's the America that George Bush has left us, and that's the future John McCain will give us, close quote.

>> But that's not Joe Biden, that's Neil Kinick [assumed spelling], isn't it? I think that's pretty good. I think that's very folksy, goes right to non-ornamental.

>> It's visual, you can actually picture it, right?

>> I don't think there's an adjective in there, and I very much, did he actually say the click clack?

>> No, no, no, that was my addition, no.

>> See, see? That's, do you see? That was the touch of genius.

>> All right. But that's actually, rhetorically that's okay.

>> I think that's pretty good.

>> It's a picture.

>> No, it's a word picture.

>> Okay. John McCain. Quote, we lost the trust of the American people when some republicans gave into the temptations of corruption. We lost their trust when rather than reform government, both parties made it bigger. We lost their trust when we valued our power over our principles. We're going to change that. The party of Lincoln, Roosevelt, and Reagan is going to get back to basics, close quote.

>> Hmm, give it a, I'd give it a five, I'd give it sort of a four point eight. It's you know, striving for grandeur, it's, there are one too many P words in there for my -

[ laughter ]

There's power and principle. It's like you know, the title of any Washington, any White House memoir. There was you know, sort of proximity to power, power, principle, and parking spaces. It's, he gives, as you know, McCain's strength is not the tele-prompted -

>> Right.

>> - speech.

>> Right.

>> He's better on his feet. But it's somewhere, that, what you just read me is somewhere between the Obama that you read me, and the Biden.

>> Okay, all right. By the way, you remind me with these P words. In all the lexicon of the English language, I only discovered one word that would cause Ronald Reagan to stumble.

>> Pneumonia?

>> Particularly. And come to think of it, it turns out to be pretty damn near unpronounceable by anyone, doesn't it?

>> Particularly.

>> Particularly. All right, Sarah Palin, quote.

>> Ah, okay.

>> Quote, I guess a small town mayor is sort of like a community organizer, except that you have actual responsibilities. Laugh. Then she continues.

>> Good.

>> I might add that in small towns we don't quite know what to make of a candidate who lavishes praise on working people when they are listening. And then talks about how bitterly they cling to their religion and guns when those people aren't listening. We tend to prefer candidates who don't talk about us one way in Scranton and another way in San Francisco.

>> The S of the Scranton versus San Francisco, which harks back in a way I think to the, do you remember Gene Kirkpatrick's [assumed spelling] rather nice formulation after the 1984 democratic convention, at which Jessie Jackson and Mario Cuomo gave the you know, the really stirring speeches. And she began referring to the San Francisco democrats.

>> Yes.

>> San Francisco being a flashcard for you know, arugula eating, latte drinking, Volvo driving sexual deviants.

>> Right, right.

>> That's pretty good I think. I think that's pretty good, what she read. I'd give that a seven, a solid seven.

>> Okay. By the way -

>> I think, I mean it's clever, I think it's clever.

>> It's clever, and it's specific.

>> Right.

>> It was a knock on Obama's line about how you know, people -

>> In small towns.

>> - in small towns cling -

>> Right, cling to their religion and guns.

>> - to God and guns.

>> From Supreme Courtship, I'm quoting a little passage. Well, the chief justice said, industry is the enemy of melancholy. [inaudible] Pepper asked? No, the chief justice replied, William F. Buckley Jr. What was the principal delight in growing up as the son of William F. Buckley Jr.?

>> I would say the Friday night sailing trips. He was, he had a sailboat, and he loved to go sailing on a Friday night. And you know, when I was young he made it great fun. He would bury treasure, and you know, produce a map that looked as though it had been drawn by Captain Kidd, and we go and find the treasure. In later years he became absolutely adamant about his Friday night sails. And in October, 1997 he had arranged a Friday night sail. And I took the train up from Washington, the clickety clack of the rails as Biden would say, and I began sort of looking out the window and seeing you know, trees being uprooted by wind, and houses flying, and cows. It was like the scene in -

>> The Wizard of Oz.

>> The Wizard of Oz, yeah. So the train pulled into the Stanford station, my father was, I looked out and saw him on the platform, he was holding on to the sign post, sort of almost horizontally. The doors of the train opened. I was blown back into the train, sort of crawled out practically on all fours. There was a northeast gale in progress, and I sort of you know, looked up. And he said well we should have a brisk sail. I said we're going out in this? And indeed, we went out in it.

>> Did you?

>> Yeah, fifty five mile an hour. It was, Glory Checkering [assumed spelling]

>> Yes, yes, yes.

>> [inaudible] who I bet has sat at this table and said intellectual things, cause that is his way. Lori Checkering was along, there were four of us, and Lori had never been on a sailboat -

>> You are, oh my goodness.

>> - in his life. And he looked up at me you know, the wind was whistling, you know, and he said do you think I should take a seasick pill? I said Lori, you're gonna be too scared to throw up.

[ laughter ]

And that was quite a memorable night. That was my old man. Great man, I've always, I've said about him I think at his memorial service, great men always have too much canvas up. They defy the odds, they're great risk takers.

>> From the eulogy you delivered for your father at Saint Patrick's. Quote, I went up to Yale, quoting you, I went up to Yale recently to inspect his archive of papers. Six thousand newspaper columns, countless articles, over fifty books. They total more than

five hundred and fifty linear feet. To put that in perspective, the spire of Saint Patrick's rises three hundred feet above us. Close quote. Now when your father was about the age you are now, I asked him a question, and I would like to put this same question to you. And the question, I don't know actually where I got the, I think we may have had a glass of wine before I asked this question, because -

>> You mean alcohol was involved?

>> Can you imagine such a thing, also cigars probably. But I said you were born wealthy, and you became famous at a very young age. Why do you keep working so hard? And I say the same to you. You may not quite have a Saint Patrick's spire to your name in a university library yet, but you have produced thirteen -

>> I don't think my memorial service at Saint Patrick's is gonna draw to a full house.

>> Christopher, this is your thirteenth book, you've published, I can't go into a dentist or doctor's office anywhere without picking up a New Yorker or New York Times and seeing something you've written.

>> Damned annoying, I know.

>> You work hard, always.

>> But it gives me pleasure. I don't you know, I'm not, listen, I'm not, I couldn't retire given, have you looked at your 401K since today? It gives me pleasure. I would be you know, I'd be lost without this. I just, you know, some people, I don't know. I love doing it. It gives me pleasure, writing. It's something I try to do every day.

>> Your father's answer was, I was raised this way. My father told me I had an obligation to my country. And that's what he said. And then you and I also know that he was also always fleeing from boredom. That's not the case with you though, is it?

>> Well I don't like to be bored.

>> Cause you know, he almost was -

>> He had an almost, he was the most impatient man I knew. I'm sure you went out to a restaurant in the course of your long acquaintance and friendship with him, and he was a great admirer of yours. He would order, the moment the main course arrived, he would order the dessert. He was really the most impatient man I knew. But that again was important, I've known a couple of great men, and they all share that characteristics.

>> Do they.

>> They have this sort of fear of the wasted time. Now it can get a little cuckoo for those around them, but that is, that's who they are.

>> Final segment. Our sharpest guide. Now whereas your father was in the business of stating his political views, you're in the business of making Americans laugh. And what that means is that your views of politics glimmer occasionally from underneath. And if I may, I'd like to haul them up into plain view for once.

>> Oh dear.

>> Yes.

>> I was afraid this would happen. Can't we just stop here? Surely four segments were enough, or five segments.  
[ laughter ]

>> In 2004 you've written that you voted for neither John Kerry nor George W. Bush, but that you wrote in George H. W. Bush. Why?

>> Cause I love him. And I, by 2004 I had, I was no longer able to vote for President Bush forty three, nor did I incline to cast my vote for Senator Kerry, which left me with the quandary of who am I going to vote for. And the best man I knew for the job was a man you and I both worked for, and love, George Herbert Walker Bush. So I did, and oddly he didn't win.

>> I quote you in the Washington Monthly, quote, the republican party I grew up into, Dwight Eisenhower, William F. Buckley Jr., Barry Goldwater, Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan stood for certain things. And then you go on to make this quite arresting -

>> Watergate, breaking into psychiatrists' offices.  
[ laughter ]

>> Well you continue with this -

>> Price and wage, wage and price control.

>> - this very arresting formulation. Despite its failures, that is the failures of the republican party, one had the sense that the party at least knew in its heart of hearts that these were failures, either of principle or execution, close quote. So you seem to be suggesting there that by 2004, 2005 there was some kind of combination of cluelessness and shamelessness in the current administration. Was it the war? Did it really come down to the war for you? Or was it -

>> Well I think, let's face it, the war, and with all you know, with all due patriotic respect for the men and women who are fighting there and dying there, I have two godsons currently in that fight, so it's something I don't view at all glibly. But let's face it, this was a misbegotten enterprise. I'm not saying we should now just pull out and let it all collapse, but this was you know, this, the lack of weapons, finding the weapons of mass

destruction I think seriously undermined the people's confidence in the government. I mean the president of the United States looked us straight in the eye and said you know, these are there, we've got to go get them. Partly the war, partly the fiscal incontinence. I don't think it's, I think it's very difficult to be proud of what eight years of republicanism have wrought. We have a five hundred billion dollar deficit, we have now a collapsing situation on Wall Street. My dad, since we've been talking about him, I'll quote him. A year before he died, he was asked what he thought of the state of conservatism, and he replied in a very WFB mode that he thought it had descended into sloth, as he pronounced it, and that it was in need of repristination [assumed spelling], lovely, lovely word.

>> Right.

>> And I think it's hard to disagree with that.

>> With single digit weeks to go before election day, is John McCain the man to do the job of repristination?

>> I'm not sure he is. And I say that with happiness and sadness in my heart, cause I've known him for a while, and I admire him. But I don't think he's the guy to do this, and I don't think he's going to do it. I think what's happening right now on Wall Street is we'll elect Obama. 82%, something like, however they arrive at these precise formulations, that the American people think the country is headed in the wrong direction. I think it's a very hard sell to say that McCain is the one who's going to take us in that direction. That said, now I like Barac Obama, I went out and bought his books.

>> He can write.

>> I'm one of the reasons he's worth four million dollars. And I don't begrudge him a penny of that, because that guy can write.

>> He can write. And you and I value the able pen. I think he's gonna get this, and -

>> And that will not break your heart.

>> No, it's not gonna break my heart. But I wish him luck, and I hope that he will do, proceed in a non-ideological way. Look, he's a left wing guy, I'm -

>> Yes.

>> I'm not. If he just goes down the left wing and raises taxes, and increases tariffs, and does all that, then we are in for a very, very rough time. I'd like to think that he is too bright to do that, and is going to as we say, govern from the center, but that he's going to govern creatively. But he has asked for it, and he may get it, and I say good luck, and give me a call if I can help.

>> From the New York Times review of Supreme Courtship. Quote, Buckley remains our sharpest guide to the capital, and a more serious one than we may suppose, close quote. When readers finish, final question. When readers finish Supreme Courtship, what do you wish them to conclude about American life?

>> That they are lucky to have a front row seat at this carnival. I don't think there's another one like it.

>> Christopher Buckley, man of letters, and after thirteen books you can't deny it.

>> You mean un dulete [assumed spelling].

>> Un dulete.

>> As we say.

>> Belet [assumed spelling].

>> Belet.

>> Belet [inaudible].

>> Another word, belletrist.

>> Exactly.

>> WFA word.

>> Exactly, exactly. I've never heard anyone else use it. And author of Supreme Courtship. Thank you. At the Hoover Institution, I'm Peter Robinson.

>> And I'm Christopher Buckley.  
[ laughter ]

>> For Uncommon Knowledge, thank you for joining us.