

What Lee Atwater Knows About Winning

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Published: April 1989



Like all performers, the bad boy of politics understands that only winners get applause.

The driver pulls the 1985 Mercedes Benz 300D up to the curb at the YMCA building in downtown Washington, D.C., and Lee Atwater, new chief of the Republican National Committee, bounds out of the caramel-colored leather back seat. Five minutes later, he has traded his blue suit, black tasseled loafers and silver Rolex for cotton running shorts topped by a "George Bush for President" T-shirt.

Atwater puts his lean, 155-pound runner's body through its paces: 12 minutes on the stationary bike, 30 minutes on a mean-looking pogo stick called "The Climber," and 10 minutes on a battalion of other machines for 30—count 'em—seconds apiece. Sweat spurts off his face and onto his shirt as he spots a man and a woman stretching languidly on mats in the center of the exercise hall.

"I hate that piddly-ass stuff," Atwater declares. "When I exercise, I *move*."

Perpetual movement is a way of life for Harvey LeRoy Atwater, 38, the brash bad boy of GOP politics. In less than 20 years, this Huck Finn look-alike with the sandpaper voice and streetwise smarts has zoomed from a college dormitory in South Carolina to the top echelons of national political power.

Known for his Machiavellian turn of mind, his "take-no-prisoners" style of politics, and his mania for winning, Atwater was the primary mastermind behind George Bush's victory last November.

In January, a grateful Bush installed his scrappy young campaign manager as head of the Republican National Committee. Now Atwater is busily sharpening his political knives to do battle this fall and in 1990 for Congressional, gubernatorial, and state legislative seats all over the country. Democrats running for seats Atwater has targeted had best watch their backs.

A specialist in negative campaigning, Atwater has developed a Prince of Darkness reputation that in recent years has grown to gargantuan proportions. But some enemies, and some supporters, too, think this villainous image is intentional. "There's clearly an advantage to being seen as the tough kid on the block," says Eddie Mahe, a Republican consultant based in Washington, D.C. "You get challenged less. But the real truth is that Lee Atwater is a hell of a lot smarter than most people in politics today. Going head-to-head, he'll beat most of them."

The first thing you notice about Lee Atwater is that he is an unabashed Southerner with a down-home accent, a taste for barbecue, a passion for pulsating rhythm and blues, and an obsession with the Civil War.

The second thing you notice is that he has learned exquisitely well the South's post-George Wallace lesson about racial politics: Use it to your advantage, but handle it ever so discreetly. Take, for example, George Bush's (read Lee Atwater's) shrewd use of the Willie Horton issue in the 1988 Presidential campaign (Horton, a black man serving time for a heinous murder, was furloughed by

Massachusetts Governor Michael Dukakis, and, while out of prison, raped and terrorized a white woman).

Atwater made certain that no reference to Horton's race came from the Bush campaign. An "unauthorized" flyer from Maryland state party officials with pictures of Horton alongside pictures of Michael Dukakis was swiftly denounced by Atwater or Bush or campaign chairman (now Secretary of State) Jim Baker. But in the end, Willie Horton produced tons of Bush votes from white Southerners, independents, and other swing voters, such as blue collar ethnics, whom Bush needed to win the Presidency. "Willie Horton," says University of South Carolina political science professor Earl Black, "came as close as the Republicans needed to come" to the race issue.

Atwater rejects charges of subtle or sleight-of-hand racism. "I didn't even know Horton's name or whether he was black or white at the beginning," he says. "I just knew he was in prison for a terrible crime. Then I hear this guy was given a furlough. He was in jail with no hope of parole. So what is he doing out on furlough? Why would you let a guy like this out? He had no incentive to go back. And he couldn't get the death penalty. What would be his incentive not to kill and rape? That's why it was such a salient issue with the American people."

Harvey LeRoy is just warming up. "I knew when I got into this business that as a Southern white boy, the one thing I could never do was do or say anything racist. There's a fierce prejudice in this country against Southern white boys on the national political scene. It's open season on us. We can be accused of anything, and anything we say can and will be used against us."

Being a Southern boy had other consequences, as well. Growing up in the South at a time when Republicans were about as common as lightning bugs in January, Atwater learned early that at-tack politics were essential if Republicans hoped to win elections. "We had to use guerrilla tactics," he explains. "Republicans in the South could not win elections by talking about issues. You had to make the case that the other guy, the other candidate, was a bad guy."

Managing Southern campaigns for 10 years also taught Atwater the knack of developing the populist ("us versus them") issues that have since proven so effective for him. He put this talent to good use in 1988, handing George Bush such vote-getters as the Pledge of Allegiance (translation: Dukakis is unpatriotic), the Horton furlough (translation: Blacks are crime prone and might get *you*), and Dukakis' membership in the ACLU (translation: Don't trust anyone who would belong to that Commie pinko organization). Atwater wasn't just whistling Dixie with these issues: If the Solid South went Bush's way, he needed only one-third of the remainder of the nation's electoral votes to win; without the South, he needed two-thirds.

Lee Atwater was born in Atlanta in 1951, son of an insurance company claims manager and a schoolteacher. The family—which included Lee's little sister, Anne, now a schoolteacher in Augusta, Georgia, and little brother, Joe, who was killed in a home accident when Lee was 5—moved to South Carolina when Lee was two weeks old and lived all over the state until 1961, when they finally settled in Columbia.

For the next decade, baby boomer Lee was one wild-ass hell-raiser, giving his all to whatever interested him at the moment. In high school, what interested him wasn't academics. "He was a terrible student, *terrible*," remembers his mother, Toddy. "His life was girls, music, and the Dark Horsemen." The Dark Horsemen was a fraternity dedicated to the proposition that having fun was

it. The Horsemen always threw the best parties, hiring bands such as Sam and Dave and The Tams to play.

Atwater himself played funky guitar in his own band, a white soul band called the Upsetter's Revue, featuring "Little Harvey." He strummed and crooned as Conrad Birdie in his high school production of *Bye Bye Birdie*. He also gave the administration fits with an underground newspaper called *Big At's Comedy Ratings*, a takeoff on the *National Enquirer*. The paper had lots of gossip stuff about "who was doing what," says Warren Tompkins, a childhood friend who is now chief of staff to South Carolina Governor Carroll A. Campbell Jr. "And it had items such as, 'So-and-so is desperate for a date. Call her Saturday night.' Then he'd give a girl's real name and real phone number." The paper featured a list of the 10 funniest kids in school. "People would stand up in class and do weird things so they could get into the comedy ratings," says Tompkins. "Lee said it was where he first learned the power of the press."

The antiestablishment reveler also learned in high school that politics could be fun. Atwater convinced classmate and fellow Horseman David Yon to run for student body president as "Dewey P. Yon." Atwater made up phony credentials for Yon and a fake platform: free beer, unlimited cuts, and no grades lower than a B.

Atwater got hooked on politics for real the summer of his freshman year at Newberry College, a small institution in Newberry, South Carolina. That's when he interned for South Carolina Senator Strom Thurmond, a former Dixiecrat and segregationist whose switch to the Republican Party in 1964 foreshadowed a similar about-face for the South, at least in Presidential elections. Thurmond became Atwater's political hero, teaching the youth 50 years his junior the "game, the competition, the show" of politics.

Atwater organized South Carolina college campuses for Thurmond's reelection campaign in 1972; he did the same for Richard Nixon's re-election in five Southern states. Meanwhile, back at Newberry College, Atwater joined the College Republicans and organized a revolt that made him state chairman. After graduation, he went to Washington as the organization's national director. There he met the man who would later propel him to the top—George Bush, then Republican party chairman.

Bush became an Atwater favorite when he helped the 22-year-old Atwater impress a "pretty, red-haired intern in Strom Thurmond's office" by giving Atwater the use of the Bush family boat docked on the Potomac. Red-haired Sally Dunbar of Union, South Carolina, apparently liked the boat ride and the stand-in captain: She and Lee Atwater were married in 1978. They have two daughters, Sara Lee and Ashley Page.

Atwater returned to Columbia and in 1974 opened his own political consulting firm, earning a reputation for hardball tactics that usually won. In four years, he notched 28 Republican victories across the South. But in his first year he lost two humdingers in South Carolina—William Westmoreland was beaten by James Edwards for the Republican nomination for governor, and Carroll Campbell was defeated by Brantley Harvey for lieutenant governor.

After each drubbing the young campaign manager literally had the dry heaves for two or three days. "I got over it," Atwater remembers, "but I never want to get to where I can stomach losing. I'm not a good loser."

At the moment, however, Lee Atwater is savoring the victory of his career. He has won the big one: George Bush has been elected President. Now the new GOP chairman—who in order to take the post gave up a reported \$400,000-plus annual income as one of the most sought after political consultants in Washington—is plotting how to attract more blacks, Hispanics, and Asians into his party.

"Big Al, get your ass in here!" crows Atwater, draping his arm around a Cuban-born businessman who also happens to be a fraternity brother. Al has come to Washington to discuss the Hispanic "outreach" plans. "Some people say that the goal of bringing minorities into the Republican Party is a pipe dream," confides Atwater, fixing his pale blue eyes on his listener and trying to tame his cowlick. "But my whole approach is to put command focus on it. Then it's damn the torpedoes and full speed ahead."

Big Al gets 10 minutes with his old buddy in Atwater's cluttered office, where two bottles of Maurice's Gourmet Barbecue Sauce ("preferred by generations of Southern cooks") wait to be rescued from a glassed wooden cabinet. So do three different varieties of hot sauce ("I love the stuff"). Books are heaped on Atwater's desk, waiting to be read. A voracious reader, Atwater says he tries to read two titles a week; lately, though, he's lucky to finish one. It's an eclectic collection: *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*; *Two Thousand Insults for All Occasions*; *In Pursuit of Reason: The Life of Thomas Jefferson*; some rhythm and blues lyrics. In his battered black briefcase are three books that travel with him everywhere: Machiavelli's *The Prince*, Clausewitz' *On War*, and Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*, a 2,500-year-old treatise by a wily Chinese general. If Stonewall Jackson had written a book, Atwater would have that, too. The Civil War general is one of his favorite tacticians. "He never lost," says Atwater.

Atwater believes that certain techniques are time proven, and that studying military procedure is crucial to winning political campaigns. Consider page 26, for example, of James Clavell's translation of *The Art of War*. "He who is skilled in attack flashes forth from the topmost heights of heaven, making it impossible for the enemy to guard against him. This being so, the places that he shall attack are precisely those that the enemy cannot defend." Mike Dukakis should have read Sun Tzu before furloughing Willie Horton.

Or leaf back to page 11. "If your opponent is of choleric temper, seek to irritate him." This technique worked on Kansas Senator Bob Dole during the 1988 Republican primaries. Dole lashed out at Atwater when the Bush forces distributed clippings from Kansas newspapers that questioned a Dole associate's handling of Elizabeth Dole's blind trust. Dole's famed temper, which his advisers had been trying to keep under wraps, was out in the open once again, for all the public to see. Tom Turnipseed, a liberal South Carolina Democrat who ran for Congress in 1980 against an Atwater client, also got a taste of Atwater's often venomous maneuvers for getting under the skin of his opponents. It seems that Atwater planted a reporter at a press briefing to ask about Turnipseed's psychiatric treatment years before as a suicidal teenager. Atwater coolly declined public comment, but later told reporters off the record that Turnipseed had once been "hooked up to jumper cables." Nine years later, Turnipseed is still bitter.

"I've seen that quote about jumper cables in *Esquire*, *The New York Times*, *The Atlanta Constitution*, and on NBC-TV and PBS," Turnipseed says. "Some reporters seem to chuckle along with good old boy Lee as he delights in making fun of a suicidal 16-year-old who was treated for depression with

electric shock treatments. Maybe it enhances his take-no-prisoners media persona." Atwater is, says Turnipseed, "the closest thing yet to a modern American Goebbels. His disdain for basic decency and ethics threatens to turn the mainstream of American politics into a sewer."

Atwater's parents aren't quite sure what to make of their son's reputation for slash-and-attack politics. "It offends us when people say mean things about Lee," says Toddy Atwater. "But when I ask him about all these things he's supposed to have done, he laughs it off and says, 'Well, I'm winning and that's the main thing.'" As for her son's penchant for the dark side, Toddy Atwater has a swift reply. "I thought politics was *supposed* to be finding bad things about the other guy and pounding him."

Meanwhile, back in the nation's capital, Lee Atwater, whose foot never stops jiggling and whose nervous energy makes you tired just to watch it, probably wishes he had a cigarette. It's Thursday, however, and since college, Atwater has allowed himself to smoke only on Fridays—a curious form of self-discipline to go along with his 35 miles of jogging each week.

His crowded calendar gets more frenetic. One Southern governor calls to chat. A Northern governor comes by for a longer talk. Acquaintances call begging for Inaugural Ball tickets. Then it's downstairs to have his picture snapped with a half-dozen very young, very dazzled Young Republicans who call him "Mr. Atwater" and who seem a little dazed that the famous campaigner is actually there in person. Upstairs, the phone messages seem to breed on his desk. Many of them are from the press, and Atwater has an obsession about returning reporters' phone calls, usually the same day. It's a policy that makes him enormously popular with journalists, with whom he is supremely comfortable.

This is not a chance occurrence. In 1977, Atwater earned a master's degree in mass communications at the University of South Carolina after deciding it would be useful to learn "how journalists work and think." He learned very well. Nobody is better than Lee Atwater at coming up with the perfect quote or the latest juicy rumor "on background"—and just in time for your deadline.

But now it's past 5 P.M. and Atwater—who began work this morning at 7, as he does most every morning, is late for a session with media guru Roger Ailes. That meeting, at Ailes' townhouse in Old Town, Virginia, lasts well into the night. Atwater could stop to eat at Red Hot and Blue, a new restaurant in Arlington ("the best ribs and rhythm and blues in town") that he opened recently, but he gets a quick bite elsewhere. It's past 10P.M. when Atwater's driver deposits him at his \$250,000-plus home near Georgetown University.

Lee Atwater "eats, sleeps, and drinks politics," says Bill Carrick, a South Carolinian who managed Democratic Representative Richard Gephardt's 1988 Presidential campaign. "It just consumes him. I really think he gets up each morning during a campaign and thinks, 'What can I do to win today?'" Carrick tells the story of Atwater in 1980, when he was managing Ronald Reagan's primary campaign in South Carolina. On the other side of the Republican fence was Harry S. Dent, one of Atwater's mentors, who was managing George Bush's Presidential campaign. Atwater knew that Dent, himself renowned for hardball politics when he was special counsel in the Nixon White House, listened to WIS radio in Columbia. So Atwater ran several radio ads—only on WIS—blasting Bush for voting in favor of gun control in 1968.

A furious Dent ended up holding a news conference to defend Bush's gun control stance, a stance

not popular in South Carolina. "Lee loves to tell that story," says Carrick. "Nobody knew much about Bush's gun control views until then, but Dent's press conference amplified the whole thing. It was vintage Atwater."

Politics is Atwater's life. Even at home on Sundays with his wife and daughters, Atwater is constantly on the telephone, returning press and political calls. Other than playing the guitar (he has electric guitars in nearly every room of his house) or watching one of the hundreds of cult films he collects ("art cult, bizarre cult, sci-fi cult, horror cult. One of my favorites is *2,000 Maniacs*"), Atwater would rather do politics than anything else.

He loves the gamesmanship of it, the spectacle of it, the strategy of it, the winning of it. "Take that away," says South Carolina State Senator John Courson, "and you take away Lee Atwater."

To Lee Atwater, power isn't simply making money. Friends and relatives say that holds little allure for him. Power to him isn't just daily access to President Bush either, although that's part of it. And it's also not just being *the* head Republican honcho, the master strategist for the entire party, although that's part of it, too. To Lee Atwater, *real* power is winning elections. Press him on why he likes to win so much, and he'll spout off about making a contribution to society like Aristotle's good citizen, about helping conservatives get into government so they can change public policy.

But his mother has another theory about why Lee Atwater is so intent on winning, winning, winning. "Lee is a ham," she says. "To him, receiving accolades is more important than money. And he has to win to get those accolades."

Winning also brings other, more personal rewards, among them the fact that it forces the Harvard and Yale types, the upper crust types, to come to *him*—a good old boy who loves wrestling and soul music and who went to little old Newberry College in South Carolina. "Ten years ago, a lot of my motivation was to show the Harvard crowd that a redneck from South Carolina could come out on top," Atwater admits.

He claims that he's mellowed some now, and that proving himself to the Northeastern establishment isn't so important anymore. But his friend Warren Tompkins isn't so sure. Being on the outside, Tompkins says, gave Atwater the edge to get to the top. "That's the key for people like us," says Tompkins. "Lee has figured out how to make that part of society come to him when they need something done."

They've been coming to him regularly since the mid-70s, when Atwater finished licking the wounds from his 1974 defeats and went back to the basics, managing South Carolina races for city council, mayor, and the State House. "See, I was in over my head in 1974," says Atwater. "I was a 23-year-old kid who tried to do too much, too fast." By 1978, with several satisfying victories behind him, he became an informal consultant to his close friend Carroll Campbell, who was pitted against a Jewish Democrat in a close race for a U.S. House of Representatives seat. Near the end of that bitterly fought contest, a third party candidate, apparently picking up on an issue suggested by a GOP poll, declared that a Jew shouldn't represent South Carolina's Fourth Congressional District. Atwater denied any connection with the religious slur (the Jewish candidate lost), but Democratic activists such as Samuel Tenenbaum of Lexington, South Carolina, are convinced that Atwater was behind it. "How is it that things like this always happen in races with which Atwater is associated?" Tenenbaum asks. "Lee Atwater has no moral compass. He will do anything to win, and he never

leaves any fingerprints."

That same year, Atwater offered to manage Senator Strom Thurmond's tough re-election race against Charles "Pug" Ravenel, a young, charismatic, Harvard-educated charmer from an old-line Charleston family who seemed to have the ancient Thurmond on the run. By now a true master at raising his opponent's "negatives" (specific issues that cause certain voters to reject a candidate under any circumstances), Atwater dove in. A colleague came across a story in a small New York weekly paper that reported Ravenel had gone to a posh Park Avenue fundraiser. There he supposedly promised the audience that although he might be from backward South Carolina, he'd make a good "third senator from New York." Atwater gleefully made a television commercial about it. Although Ravenel repeatedly denied saying any such thing, his negative rating went into outer space. Thurmond won handily. In 1980, when Ravenel ran for Congress against another Atwater client, the "third senator from New York" issue was resurrected with predictable results. Ravenel lost again.

By now, Atwater was on a roll. In addition to completing the course work for a doctorate in political science at the University of South Carolina, Atwater managed Ronald Reagan's 1980 primary campaign in South Carolina, sowing division among the forces of John Connally and George Bush—who were also running for President—by spreading rumors that the wealthy Connally was trying to buy the black vote. Reagan went on to stomp both opponents.

Atwater followed Reagan to the White House as Special Assistant to the President for Political Affairs. He was Deputy Campaign Director and Political Director for the Reagan-Bush ticket in '84, then joined the power-packed Washington consulting firm of Black, Manafort & Stone. A couple of weeks after Reagan's re-election in 1984, Lee Atwater sat down with Vice President Bush and quietly began to map out his 1988 campaign.

Republican insiders say the thing George Bush most values about Atwater is his ability to assess and size up political situations. Colleagues marvel at it. "Lee has this capacity to wander around in his head and then, with uncanny accuracy, come up with what's going to happen in eight or 12 or 24 months," says GOP consultant Eddie Mahe. "If he says, 'I think next fall so-and-so will happen,' you ought to be listening, because next fall, the odds are that so-and-so will happen, just like he said."

Bush's Atwater-planned assault on the White House went like clockwork, in part because the Democrats helped by nominating Michael Dukakis, a "Frost-belt liberal," whom Atwater could, and did, paint as left-wing, soft on national defense and crime, possibly unpatriotic, and elitist, to boot.

Atwater also drew on his knowledge of history—lots and lots of history. A history major in college, Atwater reads it ravenously. "I look at history as merely a storehouse of examples and a storehouse of tools," he says. "So I'm in the middle of something that I have to make a decision about, and I go over to the warehouse here and pull out six or seven examples, each of which I'm detached from, to examine and then synthesize. And in the middle of a campaign, I have to make decisions so fast that it's only afterwards that I realize the historical basis on which those decisions are made."

He also draws on what's happened in past campaigns (nearly all for conservative Republicans; his only Democratic client was the late U.S. Representative Larry McDonald of Georgia, a rightwinger who died on the Korean Airlines jet shot down by the Soviets). "Being in more than 40 campaigns now, there are very few things I haven't been through before in one shape or another," he says. "In almost every tough campaign situation, I've had several similar situations in my personal experience I

can relate it to.”

What all this adds up to, says Professor Earl Black of the University of South Carolina, is that the Democrats “don’t have anyone close” to Atwater’s level of expertise in winning elections. And they may not for many years to come.

What would happen is the Democrats *did* develop their own cold-blooded strategist? If Lee Atwater is concerned about that, he doesn’t show it, though as a student of history he must know that slash-and-burn tactics have often come back to haunt conquerors, just as he must be familiar with the adage, “Those who live by the sword die by the sword.”

But right now Atwater could not care less about glancing over his shoulder to see if his take-no-prisoners past is creeping up on him. Right now, Lee Atwater is a winner. He is sitting front row center at the baddest rhythm-and-blues concert Washington has ever seen. It’s the “Celebration for Young Americans” at the D.C. Convention Center on inaugural weekend—an ultimate concert that Atwater dreamed up while jogging after the election. Maybe he decided that a celebrity-studded night of rhythm-and-blues would be a high-profile way for the Republicans to signal their new interest in attracting blacks and other minorities.

But what’s this? Now, from onstage, they’re calling the South Carolina kid into the spotlight, begging him to do his thing. It doesn’t take much urging. Before long, Lee Atwater is strutting across the stage with the likes of Bo Diddley (“I’m A Man”) and Percy Sledge (“When A Man Loves A Woman”) and Joe Cocker (“You Are So Beautiful”) and dozens of other stars. Atwater slings on a pair of sunglasses, grabs his guitar, and launches into a scorching version of “Hi-Heel Sneakers.” Soon, the new GOP chief is on his back on the stage floor, furiously pounding his guitar and wailing the blues. Now the network television cameras are whirring and 9,000 “thirty-something” Republicans in evening dress are *getting down* and even President Bush jumps up onstage, making funky faces with Atwater and pretending to twang an unplugged guitar with “The Prez’ ’emblazoned across it.

What’s going on here? Sun Tzu might understand (“All we need to do is throw something odd and unaccountable at the enemy”), but Toddy Atwater may understand even better.

Lee Atwater winds up his number, coaxing every bit of screaming soul he can out of those electrified strings. At the end he accepts his reward—a stomping, whistling ovation from audience and fellow performers alike. Yes, maybe this is what makes Lee Atwater run. And as the revered chairman of the Republican National Committee basks in the adoration, an earlier Atwater seems to emerge. Suddenly, he is once again Harvey LeRoy Atwater, Little Harvey, the high school hell-raiser, political dreamer—and limelight-hungry—front man for the presciently named Upsetter’s Revue.