

FOUR

The Most Evil Man in America

In the past few election cycles, the spoiler effect has taken on unprecedented strategic importance. It is best to begin by saying something of the profession responsible for that. Political consultants are an American invention. At least until recently, other nations with long democratic traditions did not have professional campaign runners. It is sometimes claimed that consulting goes back to the early years of the republic. Thomas Jefferson's advisor, John Beckley, is cited as an early example of a "political consultant."

A much stronger claimant to that title would be Marcus Alonzo Hanna (1837-1904). Hanna's first career was as one of the great industrialists. He sagely built an empire in the burgeoning iron and coal businesses, sparing no effort in suppressing the midwestern labor movement. It was only after Hanna turned fifty that his interests shifted to politics. Though he served as senator from 1897 until his death, he is best remembered for managing the career of William McKinley. With Hanna's help, McKinley won two terms as Ohio gov-

emor and two as president. As the Republican presidential candidate, McKinley refused to travel because of the frail health of his wife. His opponent, Democrat William Jennings Bryan, was a renowned orator, traveling the country by train. Hanna rose to the challenge by designing a campaign that relied on advertising to an unprecedented degree. He raised \$3.5 million (roughly \$80 million in today's dollars, and about twelve times what the Bryan campaign spent). Hanna sent mail to everyone who had voted in 1896, some of it ethnically targeted; he produced the first political publications in Yiddish.

Hanna's efforts changed the American political equation forever. For the first time, dollars could be converted directly into votes (legally, even). After McKinley's landslide victory, no serious presidential candidate would ever again run without professional guidance.

Today's consultants are defined by electronic media, scientific polling, game-theoretic strategizing, and (not the least) a down-and-dirty ethos. These elements scarcely coexisted before the 1960s. The political decade started with the four debates of John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon. People who heard the first debate on radio judged it to be a draw. Those who watched on television knew that Kennedy had won. To the TV audience Nixon, recovering from a knee injury, looked pale, uncomfortable, and unpresidential. He had lost weight, his shirt didn't fit, and he had refused makeup to cover his five-o'clock shadow.

Consultants' sales pitch soon became "Don't let what happened to Nixon happen to you." The profession's ranks swelled through the 1960s. It was in that tumultuous decade that Joseph Napolitan coined the term *political consultant*. Napolitan worked for JFK, Lyndon Johnson, and nine foreign heads of state. His 1972 book, *The Election Game and How to Win It*, described its subject in much the terms that RAND's strategists were using for nuclear showdowns. By then, game theory was in vogue with political strategists, and Arrow's theorem was a trendy buzzword. "Campaigns are like arms races," said former Federal Elections Commission chair Trevor Potter. "You didn't know you needed another battleship until the other country had one."

Today there are something like seven thousand political consultants in America. This number is said to have tripled in the 1990s. Consultants have successfully expanded the franchise to downtown races that had never used professionals before. America's top practitioners are in demand all *over* the free world. This is one of the few industries in which outsourcing means hiring an American.

The term *political consultant* has long been a grab bag for a heterogeneous set of practitioners-campaign managers and strategists, producers of TV and radio ads, pollsters, fund-raisers, mailing list managers, and a variety of lesser advice-givers dealing with everything from hair to diction. Consulting is a highly competitive field, with college degree programs, a trade journal (*Campaigns and Elections*), and professional organizations. The lure of money and power is so potent that buzz-worthy politicians are flooded with résumés and promises to work for next to nothing. Everyone hopes for a string of successes that will launch a career. The field has approximately the burnout rate of film school graduates. The lucky few juggle half a dozen campaigns by private jet, while the majority end up pondering what else to do with their lives. About the only certainty is that the nature of campaigns shifted seismically in the last third of the twentieth century. And if there is one consultant most responsible for what campaigns have come to be, it is Lee Atwater.

Harvey Leroy Atwater was born in Atlanta on February 27, 1951. His high-school coach told Lee's mother that he would never be a football player: "He's not mean enough." That was an assessment others would find it necessary to revise. The view of former representative Pat Schroeder, a Colorado Democrat, is typical: "Lee Atwater is probably the most evil man in America."

As a consultant, it was Atwater who combined the science and the sleaze. "If I've done an innovative thing," he once told *The Atlanta Con-*

stitution, "it's consciously having this working formula, which has proved invincible in every campaign." He explained that he used polls in order to zero in on the specific issues on which voters disagreed with an opposition candidate. These issues became the themes of the campaign.

There was a little more to it than that. Atwater fought dirty. "While I didn't invent 'negative politics,'" he wrote, "I am among its most ardent practitioners."

Like consultants, negative campaigning is nothing new. In the 1828 presidential race, Andrew Jackson's opponents accused him of *cannibalism*. The same charge was brought against John Fremont in 1856. This may help put today's attack ads in perspective.

The Whigs claimed that Democrat Martin Van Buren wore the finest ladies' corsets under his suit. He ate off golden utensils and spent a fortune on diamonds, rubies, French vases, and imported beauty creams, all charged to U.S. taxpayers. The 1844 race was enlivened by the interesting claim that Henry Clay had broken every one of the ten commandments. In 1876 Democrat Samuel Tilden declared his intention to run a clean campaign against Rutherford B. Hayes. The Republicans declared that Tilden had syphilis and was an unprincipled drunkard scheming to bring back slavery. Tilden's people then claimed that Hayes had gone insane and shot his mother.

The parade of calumny continues well into the twentieth century. In 1948 Lyndon Johnson, running for the Senate against Coke Stevenson, instructed a campaign worker: "Go out there and tell 'em Coke was caught having sex with a farm animal"

The worker was aghast. "But you know that's not true!"

"Of course it's not true. That's not the point. Tell it anyway, and make him deny it."

Then something happened to politics in the middle of the twentieth century. The smears receded. For a few decades, campaigns were more civil than they had been, or would be. The biggest factor was television.

Prior to TV, citizens sat on front stoops and discussed politics. Campaigners frequented bandstands, bars, general stores, and fraternal clubs. They well knew that a nasty rumor about an opponent could tip an election. Then mass media, air-conditioning, and the move to the suburbs created a new political universe. People spent less time in public places and more time isolated in cars, cubicles, and tract homes. Hollywood provided a new set of celebrities, better looking and more uninhibited than the ones in Washington. Politics began commanding a narrower slice of the nation's attention.

The first generation of modern political consultants was in the business of selling candidates on TV. This was an era when sitcom husbands and wives slept in separate beds, when broadcast law mandated "equal time" for opposing viewpoints, and when the network news shied away from anything not suited to family audiences. John F. Kennedy let his lovers frolic in the White House pool, confident that no one would dare report his womanizing. These attitudes circumscribed what was possible in a paid TV ad.

In the 1980s, the Reagan administration relaxed equal-time requirements for broadcasters, greatly expanding the range of political commentary. It was this move that ultimately made possible Rush Limbaugh, Fox News, and Air America Radio. Cultural changes weighed in, too. Relaxed attitudes toward sex and profanity, the profusion of cable TV channels, and the rumor-intensive Internet eventually took campaigning back to where it had always been: the gutter.

In 1978 Atwater was consulting on Carroll Campbell's race for a South Carolina congressional seat. Campbell's main opponent was a Democrat, former Greenville mayor Max Heller. In July, Campbell hired pollster Arthur Finkelstein to survey likely voters.

Today Finkelstein is famous as the man who made *liberal* a dirty word in campaign ads. (He was also one of the first gays to be married in Massachusetts.) One of Finkelstein's poll questions for Campbell reportedly ran like this:

Choose from the following characteristics that best describe Campbell and Heller: (a) honest, (b) a Christian man, (c) concerned for the people, (d) a hard worker, (e) experience in government, (f) Jewish.

This was an edgy question for the time. Max Heller was Jewish. Arthur Finkelstein was Jewish. While everyone knew that religion and ethnicity affected political decisions, these were topics rarely broached so baldly in a campaign's private poll. Finkelstein's poll found that South Carolina's voters were willing to vote for a Jew. But they drew the line at voting for someone who did not believe in Jesus Christ as savior.

It might seem that being Jewish implies, to high probability, disbelief in Jesus-as-savior. Poll data often display this kind of casual illogic. In Atwater's version of this story, he passed along the poll results to the "Twelve-dollar Man," Don Sprouse. A minor candidate for the congressional seat, Sprouse had earned that nickname by running a tow service that advertised a flat twelve-dollar fee. Politically, he was a joke. His campaign consisted of his driving around the state in a motor home and talking to whoever would listen.

"Now, don't use it," Atwater supposedly said, "because we're going to do it right before the election."

Sprouse called a news conference the next day. He blasted Heller for not believing that the savior had come. A Jew had no business representing the Christian people of South Carolina's fourth district, he charged.

Assuming the poll data were anywhere near correct, Sprouse's tirade must have hurt Heller. Campbell won the congressional seat.

This incident became a blueprint for many of Atwater's later tactics. Religious intolerance had been converted into votes. The candidates, the press, and other consultants wanted to pretend that the voters were "better" than they were. Atwater was willing to exploit the voters' dark side.

He was also willing to exploit the strategic value of a minor candidate. Sprouse said things Campbell wouldn't have dared say. No one could blame Campbell for what Sprouse said, but Campbell could benefit. Sprouse's attack presumably caused some Heller supporters to switch their votes to Campbell, and others to switch their votes to Sprouse. Even the latter switch was good for Campbell because Heller was the candidate he had to beat,

Political consultants always have to worry about money. The coverage of Sprouse's attack on Heller was free publicity. When the candidates made more edifying speeches, the media couldn't care less.

Atwater's **most notorious** invention is "push-polling." This came about in another South Carolina race, two years later. Atwater was managing Ronald Reagan's 1980 presidential campaign in the South and concurrently working as a pollster for South Carolina congressman Floyd Spence, Spence's opponent was attorney Tom Turnipseed, a Democrat with an unusually checkered history. Turnipseed had been a conservative working for George Wallace's 1968 presidential run until Wallace fired him for drinking. Turnipseed joined a twelve-step recovery program, remaking his life and his politics. In 1977 he entered the gubernatorial primaries as a liberal Democrat. During this campaign he disclosed that he had suffered depression as a teenager and had undergone electroshock treatments.

In the 1980 race, Turnipseed learned that Atwater's people were phoning white suburbanites and presenting themselves as independent pollsters. Their "polls" contained confusing questions designed to leave the false impression that Turnipseed belonged to the NAACP, a big negative with white voters in South Carolina,

This was perhaps the first push poll. The point of such a poll is to change voters' opinions rather than to sample them. A push poll will pose questions such as "How would you feel if you learned that Tom Turnipseed was a member of the NAACP?"

Turnipseed complained about the phony polls. "I'm not going to respond to that guy," Atwater said of the charges. "What do you expect from someone who was hooked up to jumper cables?"

The "jumper cables" remark became emblematic of the new, nasty politics and its foremost practitioner, Lee Atwater. Even Atwater's mother, Toddy, was taken aback when she saw Turnipseed on television. According to Atwater biographer John Brady, she tearfully confronted her son by phone. "Lee, this man said the most terrible things about you on TV, that you were a dirty tricks artist."

"Mother," Atwater replied, "I'm gonna be in politics all my life, and people are gonna say things like that."

On April 27, 1985, Vice President George H. W. Bush assembled his extended family to brief them on his plans for running for president in 1988. He had chosen Atwater to run his campaign. It was an unusual choice. Despite his being the Republican Party's wunderkind, it was unclear how well Atwater's dirty-south politicking would play on a national stage. Atwater seemed an especially odd match for Bush. The vice president's aristocratic upbringing prized fair play. He said he did not want a negative campaign, and neither did his wife.

Bush had Atwater give a presentation to the assembled family. Two of Bush's sons played the skeptics. The one known as "Junior" or "W" was concerned that Atwater would still be working for the consultancy firm of Black, Manafort, Stone, whose Charles Black represented Jack Kemp, another Republican candidate.

"If there's a hand grenade rolling around George Bush, we want you diving on it first," Jeb Bush told Atwater.

"Well, if you're so worried about loyalties," Atwater said, "then why don't one of you come here in the office and watch me, and the first time I'm disloyal, see to it that I get run off?"

"W" got that job. His time spent with Atwater was an education in the new campaigning. Atwater assembled an "oppo" team ("opposition

research") headed by James Pinkerton. It was a political Manhattan Project devoted to finding dirt on Bush's opponent, Massachusetts governor Michael Dukakis. The team had more than a hundred researchers working around the clock in eight-hour shifts, with a budget of \$1.2 million. Six researchers went to Massachusetts in a motor home in order to pore over twenty-five years of back issues of the local newspapers for anything that Michael or Kitty Dukakis might ever have said or done that could be embarrassing. "The only group I was very interested in having report to me directly was opposition research," Atwater said.

Word of this massive operation got back to Dukakis by way of South Carolina Democrat Pug Ravenel. "They're going to try to tear you a new one," Ravenel warned.

"I've been in negative campaigns before," Dukakis answered.

"Whoever ran that campaign was no Atwater," Ravenel said. "Atwater is the Babe Ruth of negative politics."

Dukakis insisted on taking the high road. "I felt that keeping it positive was (a) the way we wanted to do it, and (b) the way that we *should* do it—not just in an ethical sense, but because that was what people were looking for."

To test the OPPO team's findings, Atwater set up a focus group in Paramus, New Jersey. Fifteen Democrats who had voted for Reagan in 1984 and were now leaning toward Dukakis were assembled in front of a one-way mirror. On the other side sat Atwater, pollster Robert Teeter, and media consultant Roger Ailes (later CEO of Fox News),

The moderator asked the voters how they would feel if they learned that Dukakis: had vetoed legislation requiring reciting of the Pledge of Allegiance in schools. . . was opposed to capital punishment . . . had let convicted murderers leave prison on weekend passes? The reaction to the murderers' weekend passes was galvanic. Erstwhile liberals instantly turned against Dukakis.

The prison furlough program had not been Dukakis's idea. It had

been inaugurated under his Republican predecessor, Francis W. Sargent. But Dukakis supported the program, and in 1976 he vetoed a bill that would have barred first-degree murderers from the furloughs.

Atwater's team was not the first to take note of this. Al Gore had used the furlough program against Dukakis in the Democratic primaries, citing two cases where furloughed Massachusetts criminals had committed murder while out.

Atwater's team found a case that Gore hadn't mentioned. William Horton, Jr., had been serving a life sentence for a 1974 stabbing murder when he was released on furlough on June 6, 1986. He ran away, and ten months later, in Maryland, he terrorized a young couple. He knifed the man twenty-two times and raped his fiancée twice. Horton was black, and the victims were white.

Atwater felt he had hit the jackpot. Anticipating resistance from the Bushes, he took videotapes of the focus group to the Bush compound in Kennebunkport so that the candidate could judge the effect for himself. Bush was sold. It was time to go negative.

The Bush campaign was at pains not to mention Horton's race as such. Atwater referred to Horton as "Willie:" apparently believing that the invented nickname sounded more black. The media took the cue. A reporter called "Willie" Horton in jail and asked him whom he supported for president. "Obviously, I am for Dukakis," he said.

"Did you hear about Willie's endorsement?" Atwater asked reporters. "I assume the reason he endorsed him is that he thinks he'll have a better chance of getting out of jail if Dukakis is elected. I don't know if Dukakis would let him out, but I think there'd be a better chance."

The two so-called "Willie Horton" TV ads became the template for negative ads thereafter. In midsummer a political action committee briefly aired an ad that showed a mug shot of Horton. The PAC was not officially connected to the Bush campaign, which permitted Atwater

and Bush to disown responsibility for it. The ad was quickly withdrawn in a storm of controversy—that is, free publicity, in which the media again found cause to report that "Willie" Horton was a black man who had raped a white woman. It was followed by an official Bush campaign ad attacking the furlough program. The official ad didn't mention Horton, nor did it need to.

In a televised debate with Bush, moderator Bernard Shaw asked Dukakis, "Governor, if Kitty Dukakis were raped and murdered, would you favor an irrevocable death penalty for the killer?"

"No, I don't," Dukakis began, "and I think you know that I've opposed the death penalty during all of my life." Dukakis had been expecting a question on capital punishment, just not one so personalized. Unrattled, he delivered his canned response. Dukakis's poll numbers dropped *five* points after the debate. Conservative pundits attributed the drop to that question. Red-blooded Americans liked candidates to show more outrage to hypothetical questions.

The Dukakis campaign decided not to cry racism over the Horton ads, consultant Susan Estrich said. "'We can't afford to alienate white voters,' I was told by many in my party and my campaign; whites might be put off if we 'whine' about racism."

One difference between the Bush and Dukakis campaigns was the tenure of their consultants. Atwater and Ailes remained firmly in charge of Bush's campaign. Dukakis hired and fired a whole stable of consultants. In fact, he hired Estrich twice and fired her once. (He hired her the second time after deciding he couldn't fire his campaign's highest-ranking woman.) The number of people giving Dukakis advice kept increasing.

Dukakis called Mario Cuomo, a mentor, to ask him what to do about Atwater's attacks. Cuomo's advice was "Hey, don't pay any attention to that stuff. Just let it go."

For most of the campaign, Dukakis followed that counsel. "After the campaign was over, I realized it was the worst advice he had ever given me.

People ~~resent~~ negative advertising-if you ask them whether they resent negative advertising. "But they sure do remember it," James Carville adds. In late October the Dukakis campaign ran an ad showing Dukakis watching one of Bush's attack ads and switching off the TV in disgust. "I'm fed up with it," the candidate said. "Haven't seen anything like it in twenty-five years of public life. George Bush's negative TV ads: distorting my record, full of lies, and he knows it."

The ad failed to budge the sagging polls numbers. Finally, the Dukakis people jumped the shark with their own attack ad. It presented Angel Medrano, a heroin dealer who killed a pregnant mother while on a federal prison furlough. The pregnant mother bit reeked of a too-calculated attempt to top the untoppable. Medrano was identified as one of "his [Bush's] furloughed heroin dealers," an unconvincing attempt to hold the vice president responsible for anything that happened in the federal prison system.

Bush won the election with 53.4 percent of the popular vote. He beat Dukakis by nearly eight points. To the political consultant profession, the 1988 race became an essential case study. It was a controlled experiment. Bush had decided to go negative and Dukakis hadn't (until the end). The results spoke for themselves.

The 1988 election also left a queasy sensation. Atwater had opened a Pandora's box. Henceforth, would anything be off-limits? The Washington rumor mill said that Bush had a long-running affair with an aide named Jennifer Fitzgerald. In earlier campaigns, this would have been a nonissue. But with standards in free fall, it was hard to tell how the Democrats might respond.

Atwater's own prodigious womanizing was legendary. A steady stream of lithesome Republican women visited the consultant in his office. Atwater was in the habit of telling his female friends that the Secret Service had to sweep the room for bugs every few hours-so they would have to be quick.

It's alleged that Atwater struck a deal with the Dukakis campaign. If they didn't mention the Fitzgerald rumor, the Republicans wouldn't bring up a similar infidelity rumor about Kitty Dukakis. The media was not party to any such deal. In Kennebunkport, CNN's Mary Tillotson asked Bush if he was having an "adulterous" affair. Bush blew up and refused to answer. He delegated his son, George W., to tell everyone, "The answer to the 'A' question is a big 'N-O.'"

After the election, Bush Sr. named Atwater head of the Republican National Committee. One of the items on Atwater's agenda was recruiting African Americans to the Republican Party. On that issue, David Duke was shaping up to be a major embarrassment. Duke was then running for the Louisiana State Legislature and was already talking up a run for governor in 1991. Atwater found a rule saying that the executive committee of the RNC could pass emergency resolutions. He passed one condemning Duke and excommunicating him from the Republican Party. Atwater also taped an anti-Duke commercial for black radio stations. These efforts boomeranged. The fact that the national Republicans and black radio stations hated Duke only energized Duke's supporters. As Duke defiantly told the press, "I'm just as Republican as Lee Atwater."

At the age of thirty-nine, Atwater was cracking one of his best Michael Dukakis jokes when he had a violent seizure. His doctors discovered a golfball-size tumor in his brain. It was untreatable.

"I can't imagine me getting back in a fighting mood," he told friend and journalist Lee Bandy. "I don't see how I'm ever going to be mean."

This was truer than any reasonable observer would have guessed. Atwater turned to spirituality. He tried out different approaches, religious and secular, to coping with death. One advisor told him to draw up a list of regrets. This was to include all the people he had wronged in his life. Atwater made it a point to contact all these people and apologize.

That included Tom Turnipseed, Michael Dukakis, and dozens of others who had been victims of his attack ads. Atwater apologized to a woman he had dated in college, whom he had tried to trick into having sex with all of his fraternity brothers. During a Christmas retreat at a vacation home, he painstakingly confessed every extramarital affair he could remember to his wife-and to a couple of friends who had dropped by to wish them Merry Christmas.

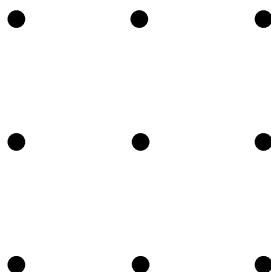
Atwater went public with his apologies in a *Life* magazine profile that ran the month before his 1991 death. Most surprisingly, he renounced his trademark character assassination and dirty tricks in favor of . . . peace and love. "My illness helped me to see what was missing in society is what was missing from me: a little heart, a lot of brotherhood."

Atwater's deathbed repudiation of negative campaigning was to have no discernable effect on his profession. Even those consultants who were philosophically opposed to his tactics had already found that they had to adopt them or perish. Darrell West of Brown University reported that 35 percent of ads were negative in 1976, about when Atwater was starting to make a name for himself. This proportion rose to 83 percent in 1988. You don't need statistics to know that it is now asymptotically approaching 100 percent. The *New York Times* found that the 2006 elections were conducted in "the most toxic midterm campaign environment in memory." Of at least thirty new House and Senate race ads rolled out the last week of September 2006, only three were positive. Strategists from both parties said they expected the percentage of negative ads aired by Election Day to be over 90 percent.

Atwater gave the appearance of being unconflictedly amoral in his professional life. He had convictions, of course. His personal politics were corporate-libertarian. He was pro-choice and dismissed the religious right as the "extra-chromosome crowd." He held it was okay to exploit fake polls, bigotry, innuendo, or anything else to elect the candidates he believed were best for America. His professional legacy was to bring political consultants into near-congruence with the cold

warriors of the RAND Corporation and the Kremlin. Running a campaign became a game in which it was necessary and expected to seize **every** strategic advantage possible. The essence of political consulting is thinking about the previously unthinkable.

Atwater liked to compare his strategizing to the "nine-dot puzzle." You are given a simple grid of nine dots. The challenge is to draw four straight lines that run through all nine dots without lifting pen from paper.



The solution is to look beyond the implicit grid, to ignore the "rules" that aren't rules at all. After the 2000 election, Atwater's successors did just that.