



Playing Hardball: What You Can Learn from Lee Atwater

Inside secrets to playing to win from the GOP operative who rewrote the book on presidential campaigning & turned politics into a blood sport...

I didn't know Lee Atwater ... the late political strategist, former Chairman of the Republican National Committee and guiding hand behind George Bush the First's winning 1988 presidential campaign.

But people I've talked to who **DID** know him swear by his political genius ... and all but worship his cutthroat willingness and ability to play hardball against the left.

So I went out and purchased a copy of Atwater's biography by John Brady, "*Bad Boy: The Life and Politics of Lee Atwater*." It is, to say the least, interesting reading.

And there's a ton of information in just the third chapter about Atwater's thinking and strategies about campaigns which you need to know - that is, if you want to win your own campaign.

The lessons and advice were gleaned from the 1976 state senate race Atwater

managed for South Carolina's Carroll Campbell ... who later went on to become the state's governor.

These are, in fact, "hot tips" by the master GOP political operative of the time.

But be warned, they are NOT necessarily politically-correct and are often raw ... but not obscene ... in their presentation. Some highlights and excerpts are presented here, undiluted, for your consideration.

What you do ... or do not do ... with the advice is completely up to you.

Required Reading

Lee Atwater was a big follower of the battle strategies and tactics described in the book, *The Art of War* by the ancient Chinese general Sun Tzu.

I've highly recommended this book to you in the past. If you still haven't read it ... what are you waiting for?

Avoiding Analysis to the Point of Paralysis

I've attributed the following phrase to Newt Gingrich in the past, but "Bad Boy" claims it's an Atwater original.

Frankly, it doesn't matter who coined the phrase, it's just something you and your campaign need to take to heart...

"When you need to make a decision, (a) make the damn decision, and (b) implement it - quickly."

Who's In Charge Here?

There's an old saying in legal circles that a defendant who represents himself in court has a fool for a client. Ditto a candidate who manages his or her own campaign.

The candidate has three jobs ... period:

- 1.) Ask for votes

2.) Ask for money

3.) Ask for volunteers

The rest is the province of the campaign manager and others.

Atwater was adamant that the campaign manager be in charge of running the campaign. In *Bad Boy* he's quoted as giving a novice campaign manger the following advice:

"When she (the candidate) panics over something, tell her anything, get her off your back, lie to her, if necessary. Then run the campaign exactly as you planned it."

If you, as the candidate, don't have the faith and trust in the discretion and judgment of your campaign manager, then you probably shouldn't have hired him or her in the first place.

And if you, the campaign manager, aren't willing to assert yourself and do what you KNOW is the best thing for your candidate, then you shouldn't be taking their money.

As Gen. Norman Schwarzkopf says, if you're put in charge ... take charge.

Gentle Pressure to Loosen Up the Purse Strings

"Atwater directed a phone solicitation of physicians and businessmen, 'emphasizing that Campbell could win with or without their help, but that Campbell personally reviewed all contributions and would be disappointed if their names were absent.' Cha-ching: \$4,000 more."

The Power of the Boob Tube

"When television spots are well produced, winning is considered inevitable. Obviously, there are other factors to be considered, but if television can sell soap suds, it can sell politician appeal."

Targeting Resources

“As with television, Lee picked radio stations carefully. He knew that Nixon had carried (South Carolina in 1972) with 68 percent of the total vote but had received only 3 percent of the black vote. So he bought no time on black stations.”

This sounds harsh and, of course, “racist.” But it’s simply political reality.

Most campaigns are on a limited, if not shoestring, budget. You just can’t afford to waste precious resources trying to persuade the unpersuadable.

The Power of Billboards

“Atwater thought that billboards fired up the faithful. Campbell’s campaign bought fourteen at \$100 apiece [remember, this was back in 1976]. In fact, Campbell turned out to be the only candidate in Greenville County to use billboards. ‘Anytime one can totally dominate one form of advertising, impact upon the voter is enhanced tremendously,’ Lee reflected.

“In the neighborhoods, Atwater used stick signs - two three-by-five-foot boards placed on either side of a pole and stuck into the ground. The top board said CAMPBELL; the bottom, S.C. STATE SENATE.

“Atwater thought that the stick signs had the same impact as billboards but were far cheaper. In addition, he said, ‘should Campbell ever run for another office, the bottom board can be replaced with another one indicating the new office.’”

Name ID and image account for some 90 percent of the voting decision of last-minute undecided voters.

While many prima donna political consultants pooh-pooh the use of billboards and yard signs (they don’t pay fat commissions, you see), you’d be wise to make generous use of them.

Most Newspapers Are for Lining Bird Cages

“Atwater considered newspapers the least effective mass medium. Less than

20 percent of the public read newspapers; far fewer read the political ads.

“However, (Atwater) felt that people in this rural state scrutinized the rural weeklies more carefully than they did the dailies. ... Accordingly, he placed half-page CAMPBELL ads in the Clinton Chronicle, the Laurens Advisor, the Greer Citizen and three other weeklies in the district for the two editions before the election.”

What Comes First ... The Chicken or the Egg?

“Paid media was the greatest part of a campaign budget. Timing mattered. ‘Billboards come first, because they are the best at instilling name recognition in voters,’ Atwater said. According to him, they should go up forty-five to thirty days before the election.

“Radio spots should start twenty-one to fourteen days before the election. Television should begin twenty-one to seven days before the election, converting the candidate from a name into a human being. Newspapers, serving as a reminder, should begin during the last week.”

Of course, all of this is dependent upon the race, the budget and the campaign’s ability to raise the money or fund the budget.

A high-profile, big-budget race is likely to launch its paid media campaign well before the timelines outlined here by Atwater.

As with everything else, YOU have to evaluate your own particular race and determine if the advice here applies. Nothing is etched in stone.

As often as not, you should follow the experienced advice of the professional ... but always keep in mind unusual circumstances which may call for different actions in your particular race.

Direct Mail Targeting & Absentee Ballots

“Direct mail was more focused than mass media. ... The campaign couldn’t afford to send a letter to every potential voter, so Lee had to choose with care. He decided to focus in part on absentee ballot voters.

“From September to the week before the election, the Greenville and Laurens County election commissions received daily ballot requests from students, military personnel and the hospitalized.

“...Lee’s assistant Jeannie Bettis went to the election commission every Wednesday and took down the names and addresses of everyone who requested absentee ballots for that week, and then she sent them campaign letters that reached them two days before they got their absentee ballots.”

Many an election has been decided by the absentee vote count. Candidates who lost on election day have ended up in the winner’s circle after the absentee vote was counted. You could look it up.

So make SURE you have a similar plan in place for communicating with absentee voters.

Focus on the Undecided, Ignore the Opposition’s Voters

“Atwater also sent direct mail to more than three thousand potential voters who had been identified as undecided in phone polls. Letters went to independent Republicans and to people who seemed disposed to vote for other Republicans on the ticket. Lee said, ‘The theory was that a letter to those who appeared to be Democrats would only serve as a reminder to vote, and vote they would - for the opposition.’”

You’d think it would be common sense not to waste time and money mailing to people who have already made up their minds to vote for your opponent. But it continues to happen every election cycle in races at every level.

Some campaigns are just too ignorant or inexperienced to know better. Others are just too damn lazy or disorganized to do the voter ID work necessary before launching the campaign’s mail program.

And then there’s the “over-funded” campaigns who have so much money they just throw cash at everything.

What’s ironic is to see Republican candidates who are so fond of telling the people that, in government, just throwing money at a problem ... such as education ... won’t fix the problem.

Then they turn around and do exactly that on their own campaign.

Wasting Money on “Crap”

“(Atwater) had less faith in giveaways. A candidate for the state legislature once handed out ‘Frisbees, measuring cups, sponges, pens, combs, mirrors, key chains, and pot holders, all of which had his name engraved on them,’ he recalled. ‘This is absurd.’

“He yielded to staff requests for calendar cards and bumper stickers but nixed buttons. ‘Buttons are great at conventions and political party gatherings,’ he said, ‘but very few people in the real world wear them in public.’”

Most personalized giveaways and novelties are all about ego gratification for the candidate ... not getting votes from the electorate.

Put your ego in check ... and put your checks into communication tools that actually communicate with targeted voter audiences.

“One giveaway that Atwater insisted upon was a brochure. When someone dropped by headquarters and asked for something to do, Atwater would hand him or her a fistful of brochures to distribute. The key to an effective brochure, according to Lee, was to remember that ‘because most people do not like politics or politicians, the brochure should be as ‘nonpolitical’ as possible.’”

Media & Publicity

“At least a fourth of campaign publicity should be free, said Atwater. He had an assortment of devices to resort to: press releases, radio appearances, press conferences, appearances on television and staged human-interest events. For local or county campaigns, one press release a week was enough.”

Important rule here: Go for quality, not quantity.

“(Atwater’s) press releases were hand-delivered, never mailed, to increase reporters’ ‘feelings of importance and help them feel appreciated and taken into confidence,’ he said.

“They had to be delivered an hour before deadline so that reporters could work the ‘news’ into their day’s work. A release rarely ran longer than one page; the lead was no more than twenty-five words. Reporters had to be able to read it at a glance.”

In this day of e-mailed and social media press releases, how much more of an impact will a hand-delivered press release make? Most likely, very substantial.

As to the length of a press release, again note that it’s quality, not quantity, that counts.

“The ideal day for a release was Saturday, when newsroom staffs were small and inexperienced.”

There’s also not as much competition for news on weekends, enhancing the possibility that your release will receive some coverage.

“Lee viewed press conferences as risky ‘pseudo-events.’ Rare was the candidate who could sidestep their pitfalls. Usually the candidate reads a prepared text - but then must answer reporters’ questions on anything.”

On Issues, Issues and Issues

“The real issues for voters in the district related to money. Jobs, taxes, government spending - these were ‘mom and apple pie’ issues that cut across party lines. ‘Obviously, no American was opposed to pocketbook conservatism.”

If you want the voter’s vote, talk about what is important to the voter ... not what’s important to you.

“Said Lee, ‘Confederate General Nathan Bedford Forrest answered the question of how he developed his battle strategy with the reply, ‘You git thar the fustest with the mostest.’

“The same strategy holds true with campaign issues. One must be quick to seize the initiative and capture the fertile ground, making any response of the opposition look like the typical ‘me too’ guy answer.”

The importance of being first in the minds of the voters cannot be overstated. Keep your ear to the ground ... look and listen for opportunities ... and pounce!

Voter Identification and Voter Turnout

“Lee learned early that every vote counted. Only 60 percent of the eligible population in the United States was registered to vote. Of those registered, only half participated in the general election.

“In the primaries, voter apathy had an even more profound effect, with only about 15 percent total participation. In close elections, therefore, 15 to 16 percent of the eligible population was electing candidates for president and senator.

“If the campaign manager knew the candidate’s base and could identify it, he could win a primary with 10 to 15 percent of the voter population. Because of these basic circumstances, Lee said, ‘The precinct is the key to the whole election.’”

Voter turnout ... especially for primaries ... is still VERY low in most races. This is a tremendous opportunity for novice and under-funded candidates ... IF they get their acts together.

Once out of the primary, the winner often gets financial and other help from the party “establishment.”

Ideological Republicans wishing to change or influence the direction of the GOP need to focus more on primary races ... especially in “down ballot” races.

“There were 115 precincts in Greenville and Laurens Counties. ‘Ideally, a chairman was necessary in each of these to canvass the precinct and make sure every voter identified as a Campbell supporter showed up at the polls on election day,’ Lee said later.”

Most dumb campaigns don’t even bother to identify the voters in their district, let alone make sure they turn out on Election Day.

Even worse, most party organizations take the lazy way out and simply call every

registered Republican and urge them to “get out and vote” - even Republicans who are committed to voting for the Democrat candidate!

Now, just how STUPID is this kind of get-out-the-vote plan?

“Because there were up to 3,000 voters in each precinct, comprehensive canvassing would be a massive undertaking. Rather than organize every precinct, he ranked them in the order of importance to Campbell’s winning. If the top 45 precincts were effectively organized, and if the second group of 30 were somewhat organized, then Campbell would win Greenville County by at least 55 percent.”

Again, target your resources. If you can’t be everywhere and do everything, do what you can in the most critical areas.

“Atwater knew from experience that you couldn’t depend on any one precinct chairman to do the job; on election eve some will plan to be out of town until after the vote, he said. So he placed four volunteers in each of the 45 key wards, confident that at least one would finish the job.”

This goes to Murphy’s Law of political campaigning: Anything that can go wrong, will.

So prepare for the inevitable and have a back-up plan. Don’t put all your GOTV eggs in one precinct chairman’s basket.

The key is to begin recruiting and training precinct workers well in advance ... at LEAST six months before Election Day. And always have a contingency plan for when things go rotten (and they will).

Time: The Candidate’s Most Precious Resource

“Almost as much as votes, what every candidate needed was time. ... Each Wednesday morning, he and Campbell reviewed the events of the previous week and planned the week to come.

“Atwater never scheduled more than two weeks in advance. ‘Accepting invitations months in advance, the schedule may demand attendance at 20-member meetings of the Young Republican Club, sparsely attended and all

supporters anyway, while an invitation to the textile show, with 3,000 attending must be turned down,' he explained.

"Once he gave his word, however, Lee never broke a scheduling commitment."

Hearken, dear reader. Once you give your word ... don't break it.

"(In retrospect after the campaign, Atwater) felt that Campbell had been scheduled into too many meetings - Republican functions, voter fairs, 'Meet the Candidate' events sparsely attended by the media.

"In the future, the candidate would go to 'events attended by media and groups with many nonpartisan and independent voters. Campaign workers, not the candidate, should attend the voter fairs and hand out brochures and buttons.'"

Voter ID: The Best Thing a Volunteer Can Do

"Atwater had observed that in a campaign, 'almost anyone who talks to the candidate will ask him to 'let me know if there is anything I can do.'

"It would be impossible to follow up on this kind of request effectively. 'Generally, when the candidate gets around to contacting these people, they are preoccupied with their own affairs and do not have time to undertake any heavy campaign responsibilities.'

"So Lee created a brochure, which the candidate carried with him at all times. The brochure had space for ten names. 'Anyone who wanted to help was given such a packet and told to identify ten prospective supporters and return the packet in a pre-stamped envelope. This identified more than 1,000 supporters.'"

I hope you see the pure genius of this.

First, the main reason volunteers don't do any work for you is that no one gets back to them in a timely fashion to give them something meaningful to do.

Voter ID is perhaps the most meaningful task of any campaign. So the ability of a candidate to recruit and mobilize a volunteer IMMEDIATELY ... on the spot ... with a voter ID brochure is INVALUABLE.

(Pssst. You should be running ... not walking ... to your printer RIGHT NOW!)

(1) Campbell won that state senate race in 1976 by more than 10,000 votes in a year when Jimmy Carter swept South Carolina. In fact, Campbell was the **ONLY** Republican to win a new state senate seat that year.

(2) Lee Atwater was no blow-dried prima donna. He knew his stuff. Ignore his strategic wisdom on these pages at your own peril.

Cheers.



Dr. Chuck Muth, PsD
THE CAMPAIGN DOCTOR
*Professor of Psephology**
(homeschooled)

** Psephology (see-follow-gee): The study of campaigns and elections*

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