

Current Biography

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Atwater, Lee

Feb. 27, 1951 - Chairman of the Republican National Committee; political consultant.
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The first professional political consultant to head either of the country's major political parties, Lee Atwater is the leader of a combative new breed of baby boom Republicans who believe that their party has accepted minority status for too long, and who are determined to make the GOP the dominant political organization in the United States by the year 2000. Atwater orchestrated the successful presidential campaigns of Ronald Reagan in 1984 and of George Bush in 1988. It was the Bush campaign that established him as the recognized master of "negative" campaigning, the object of which is to achieve victory by attacking one's opponent on such "values" issues as crime, gun control, taxes, welfare reform, national defense, abortion, and school prayer.

According to Gerald M. Boyd of the *New York Times* (May 30, 1988), Lee Atwater "sees politics as a sort of nonlethal but still intense warfare." That bare-knuckled approach has made him extremely controversial, and the increasing popularity of his tactics among others in his profession has created concern in some quarters. "Lee Atwater did not invent the campaign consultancy business," Eric Alterman wrote in his profile of the Republican chairman for the *New York Times Magazine* (April 30, 1989), "but he may be the person most responsible for the way it's practiced today." By his own admission, Atwater takes little interest in the intricacies of government. "My job," he told David Remnick for an *Esquire* (December 1986) interview, "is the politics of politics. . . . The contest, the winning and losing thing is big for me. I can't stand to lose . . . when I lose I get physically sick." But as Atwater also explained in his interview with Boyd, "I play to win. But I play by the rules. . . . Is it a matter of winning at all costs? No, that doesn't work because there is too much scrutiny. You have to follow a code, and if you don't you're going to get burned and your candidate is going to get burned."

Harvey Leroy Atwater was born on February 27, 1951 in Atlanta, Georgia, the older of the two sons of Harvey Dillard Atwater, an insurance claims adjuster, and Alma (Page) Atwater, a teacher. When Lee was five, his younger brother, Joe, died of burns suffered in a kitchen accident. Recalling his brother's death in the interview with David Remnick, Atwater said, "I think I learned pretty early that in the end, it's only you. To an extent, you're



all alone." The Atwaters often moved during Lee's early childhood before finally settling in Columbia, South Carolina when he was nine. An energetic and restless child, Lee Atwater was interested in wrestling and music. At A. C. Flora High School, he also distinguished himself as something of a prankster by publishing a scurrilous underground newspaper called *Big At's Comedy Ratings*, and, as an eleventh grader, by delivering an oral book report on the Columbia telephone directory. "He said it jumped around too much from character to character without sustaining any of them," Robert C. Ellenburg, Atwater's English teacher, recalled to Eric Alterman. "He predicted it would have to be revised next year." Making his debut as a political consultant, Atwater organized his fellow student David Yon's tongue-in-cheek campaign for the office of student body president. "I made up a whole lot of phony issues for him to run on," Atwater told David Remnick. Those spurious "issues" included free beer in the cafeteria, unlimited absences from class, and the giving out of no grades lower than B's. Yon won, but the school principal called for another election.

By his senior year in high school, Atwater's interest in music had intensified. With a few classmates, he formed a white "soul" band called the Upsetter's Review, which performed all over South Carolina, and which also sometimes played behind such nationally known acts as Percy Sledge and the Drifters. He begged his parents to allow

him to continue playing with the band after high school, but they insisted that he attend college. Largely because he had devoted so much of his time to playing music, Atwater's high school grades were so poor (his mother, a Spanish teacher, even gave him a D minus) that the only college that would accept him was nearby Newberry College, which did so only after Mrs. Atwater arranged a personal consultation with its admissions officer.

In the summer after his sophomore year at Newberry, Atwater, again at his mother's prompting, obtained an internship in the Washington office of South Carolina's longtime conservative Republican senator, J. Strom Thurmond. That experience, his first with national politics, had a profound effect upon him. According to David Remnick, Atwater studied Thurmond "the way hitters used to watch Ted Williams practice." "Boy did I learn from that man," Atwater told Remnick. Hooked on politics, Atwater immediately joined the College Republicans when he returned to school that fall. As he explained to Gerald M. Boyd, his decision to align himself with the GOP was motivated to some degree by the party's stance on individual freedom and partly by other considerations. "When I got into politics in South Carolina the establishment was all Democrats and I was anti-establishment," he told Boyd. "The young Democrats were all the guys running around in three-piece suits, smoking cigars, and cutting deals, so I said, 'Hell, I'm a Republican.'"

At the time that Atwater joined the South Carolina College Republicans, the state's largest schools, Clemson University and the University of South Carolina, controlled the organization, and smaller institutions such as Newberry had much less influence. Setting out to remedy that situation, Atwater asked the larger schools for a constitutional convention and, to his surprise, they agreed. Within a matter of months, the smaller colleges had taken control of the College Republicans, and Atwater had been elected state chairman, an office he used to establish Thurmond organizations at colleges throughout South Carolina. While a junior at Newberry, Atwater managed his first campaign, when he helped William Edens to get elected mayor of Forest Acres, South Carolina. The following year, he was chosen as a delegate to the Republican National Convention in Miami. By the time he graduated from Newberry in 1973 (with a B.A. degree in history), Atwater had been appointed executive director of the College Republicans' national office in Washington, D.C. There he first made the acquaintance of George Bush, who was then chairman of the Republican National Committee. The two men began meeting regularly, and Bush took such a personal interest in Atwater that on one occasion he lent him the use of his boat for a date with Sally Dunbar, the young woman who eventually became his wife. "Here was this guy, the chairman of the party, who took an interest in me and befriended me at a time when there was no obvious interest in it for him," Atwater told Gerald M. Boyd. "I became a big fan."

In 1974 Atwater returned to Columbia, South Carolina, where he established the political consulting firm of Baker & Associates. (There was no one named Baker at the firm, and Atwater at first had no associates. He named the agency after a man named Baker whose portrait he had purchased at a garage sale.) His first year in the campaign consulting business was a rough one: he managed two campaigns (William Westmoreland for governor and Carroll Campbell for lieutenant governor) and lost both of them. "I was in over my head," Atwater, who at the time was just twenty-three years old, admitted in the interview with Boyd. "I felt I never wanted to get in that situation again, so I decided to learn from the bottom up." For the next four years he organized campaigns for local Republican office seekers in the South, racking up twenty-eight wins, before moving on, in 1978, to J. Strom Thurmond's campaign for reelection to the United States Senate. It was in that campaign that Atwater first used the "negative" campaign tactics for which he later gained notoriety. He learned that Thurmond's Democratic opponent, Charles Ravenel, had reportedly made a comment at a New York City fund-raiser about being embarrassed to be from South Carolina, and that he had allegedly expressed a desire to be the "third senator from New York." (Ravenel later denied ever making the remark.) Atwater immediately ran a commercial focusing on Ravenel's supposed comment, and the challenger's negative rating in the polls soon jumped from 12 percent to 43 percent. On election day, Thurmond won with 56 percent of the vote.

That year, Atwater managed Carroll Campbell's first congressional race. In the course of the campaign, a third-party candidate, allegedly at Atwater's urging, attacked the Democratic candidate, Max Heller, a Jew, for refusing to believe "that Jesus Christ has come yet," a remark that highlighted Heller's Jewishness in what is predominantly a Protestant state. Campbell won easily. Following the election, Atwater strongly denied any complicity in the attack, insisting it had occurred before the time that he became directly involved in Campbell's campaign.

In 1980 Lee Atwater was accused of employing "dirty tricks" tactics in a South Carolina congressional race between the Republican contender Floyd Spence and the Democrat Tom Turnipseed. At a Turnipseed press briefing, a reporter who had allegedly been "planted" by Atwater rose and said that he understood that Turnipseed had formerly undergone psychiatric treatment and electroshock therapy. Turnipseed protested, but Atwater told reporters he would not respond to someone who, in his words, had once been "hooked up to jumper cables" (a comment for which he later apologized), and he insisted that he had not planted the reporter. Yet while Atwater maintained his innocence in both the Turnipseed and Heller controversies, he also later said of his early days in South Carolina politics, "We had to use guerrilla tactics. 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." As manager of Ronald Reagan's 1980 South Carolina primary campaign, Atwater became embroiled in controversy once more. After learning that George Bush, also a contender for that year's Republican presidential nomination, had once supported gun-control legislation, Atwater hired Reid Buckley, the brother of the influential conservative editor and author William F. Buckley, to tape a radio commercial attacking Bush's position. But the voice on the commercial was identified only as "Mr. Buckley," leaving many listeners with the impression that William F. Buckley had branded George Bush a moderate who would attempt to limit their right to bear arms, a cherished prerogative in South Carolina. Bush was forced to go on the defensive, and Reagan won the primary in a landslide.

After the Republicans closed ranks, Atwater became the Southern regional director for the Reagan-Bush ticket, which went on to carry every Southern state except Georgia as part of a forty-four state landslide, and in 1980 he also managed six successful congressional campaigns. Following Reagan's inauguration, Atwater, at the age of twenty-nine, became special assistant to the president for political affairs. He remained in that post until 1984, when he was appointed director of the Reagan-Bush reelection campaign, steering the incumbents to an easy victory over the Democratic ticket of Walter F. Mondale and Geraldine A. Ferraro. Returning to the private sector, he then signed on as a partner with the Washington firm of Black, Manafort & Stone, political consultants. In 1986 George Bush asked Atwater to serve as chairman of his political action committee, the \$5 million Fund for America's Future, which was used, in part, to get the "Bush-in-'88" campaign rolling. After laying the groundwork for that campaign, Atwater was asked to become, in February 1987, manager of the George Bush for President Committee.

The Bush campaign got off to a disappointing start as the candidate finished third in the Iowa caucuses in January, trailing both Senator Robert J. Dole of Kansas and Pat Robertson, the former religious broadcaster. Late polls showed Bush running behind Dole in February's New Hampshire primary, but the vice-president rebounded to win, then went on to sweep the so-called Super Tuesday primaries in the South, and won the Republican nomination going away. The Bush-Dole battle was a heated one in which both candidates resorted to personal attacks on the other's character. At one point, Dole accused Atwater of being behind a series of disclosures about the personal finances of his wife, Elizabeth Hanford Dole, who had resigned from her position as secretary of transportation to work on her husband's campaign. Atwater responded by calling Dole "a typical schoolyard bully," adding, "He can dish it out but if someone hits him back, he starts whining." In addition, Atwater sent Dole a ten-page letter in which he detailed negative campaign tactics that he said the senator had used against Bush.

In the general election campaign, Atwater masterminded the Republican strategy of depicting Governor Michael S. Dukakis of Massachusetts, the Democratic nominee, as being soft on national defense and crime. That strategy was highlighted by a controversial television spot featuring a convicted murderer named Willie Horton who, while on a weekend furlough from a Massachusetts state prison, committed a rape. In a speech to a group of Republican activists in early June, Atwater had reportedly said, "If I can make Willie Horton a household name, we'll win the election." Some observers detected racist overtones in the Republican attacks, since Horton is black and the woman he raped is white, but Atwater repeatedly insisted to reporters that the issue was crime, not race. And in the interview with Eric Alterman, he downplayed his role in the entire affair, saying he personally prohibited the use of any pictures of Horton in campaign ads and wrote to Bush campaign groups around the country, requesting that they stop all Horton-related television spots. "As a white Southerner," Atwater told Alterman, "I have always known I had to go the extra mile to avoid being tagged a racist by liberal Northerners. If anybody from the South says or does anything, it's racially motivated. I defy you to find any other campaign I have done where race has become the issue. . . . Race, politically, is a loser."

Atwater's key role in Bush's successful bid for the presidency established him as the most prominent political consultant in the United States. When, on November 17, 1988, Bush named him chairman of the Republican National Committee, succeeding Frank Fahrenkopf, who had announced his intention to resign when his term expired in January 1989, Lee Atwater became the first professional campaign consultant designated to lead either of the nation's major political parties. In commenting on Atwater's appointment, E. J. Dionne Jr. of the *New York Times* (November 18, 1988) wrote, "For Mr. Atwater, for whom politics is the love, and government simply the thing that happens after a campaign, this job is just right." Quickly establishing an agenda for the party, Atwater announced that the GOP would attempt to break the Democratic party's thirty-five-year hold on the House of Representatives by targeting, in each election year, twenty to thirty Democratic incumbents who appear to be most vulnerable, and recruiting highly qualified Republicans to oppose them. Atwater also pledged himself to continue the Republican effort, begun during Fahrenkopf's administration, of attempting to gain control of as many governorships and state legislatures as possible in order to block Democratic gerrymandering of congressional district lines following the 1990 census. (The GOP has received about 48 percent of the composite vote in recent races for the House of Representatives but controls only about 40 percent of the seats in that body.)

The most ambitious of Atwater's strategies involves the recruiting into the Republican camp of blacks and other minorities who have traditionally

supported the Democratic party. In an Op-Ed article that appeared in the *New York Times* (February 26, 1989), Atwater wrote: "Making black voters welcome in the Republican party is my pre-eminent goal. . . . If our party is to step out of minority status it must be the party of all Americans. Anything short of that is unacceptable." He kicked off his effort to court black support even before officially taking over as GOP chairman on January 18, 1989. Three days earlier, on the anniversary of Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday, he visited the Atlanta church where Dr. King had once preached, and he organized an all-star rhythm-and-blues revue to perform at one of George Bush's inaugural parties. The show featured several prominent black R&B performers, including Willie Dixon, Bo Diddley, and Sam Moore. (Atwater himself also sang and played the guitar.)

In February, Atwater was appointed to the board of trustees of Howard University in Washington, D.C., one of the nation's most prestigious black colleges. The new GOP chief then endured two major setbacks in his campaign to entice blacks into the party, the first of which was the election of David Duke, a former grand wizard of the Ku Klux Klan, to the Louisiana state legislature as a Republican. Atwater not only quickly denounced Duke as a "charlatan" and had the Republican National Committee censure him, but he also taped a commercial for play on black radio stations, condemning him. Unfortunately, a *New York Times* (February 22, 1989) editorial, after taking Atwater to task for his part in the Willie Horton television campaign, said he "inescapably" bore "some responsibility for making the Republicans so vulnerable to such racist infiltration." His problems were exacerbated when, on March 6, 1989, 200 Howard University students seized the school's main administration building to protest his appointment to the board of trustees. The students blamed Atwater for what they believed were racial innuendos in Bush's presidential campaign, especially the Willie Horton affair. A day later, Atwater reluctantly resigned from the board of Howard University.

In his *Esquire* profile, David Remnick described Lee Atwater as "wiry, sandy-haired, quick-eyed, and tight-mouthed, . . . a great mass of nerves and energy, a complex of tics and vibrations." Atwater and his wife, the former Sally Dunbar, whom he married on June 24, 1978, live with their two daughters, Sarah Lee and Ashley Page, in a small townhouse in downtown Washington. His two chief avocational interests are reading (both fiction and nonfiction) and rhythm-and-blues. The owner of six guitars, one of which was a gift from Ron Wood of the Rolling Stones, Atwater also possesses an extensive collection of blues tapes. On visits to Columbia, South Carolina he sometimes performs at Bullwinkle's, a local nightclub. The chairman typically puts in twelve- to fifteen-hour workdays, beginning with a meeting with his senior staff at 7:00 in the morning and usually ending with an evening speaking engagement or fund-raising appearance. Lee Atwater received an M.A. degree in

journalism from the University of South Carolina in 1977, and he is in the midst of completing a doctoral thesis on negative campaigning at the same institution. Although he usually eats only one meal a day, Atwater douses all of his food in hot pepper sauce, and he is part-owner of a barbecued-rib restaurant in the Washington suburb of Arlington, Virginia. His religious affiliation is Methodist.

References: *Esquire* 106:280+ D '86 pors; *N Y Times* A p11 My 30 '88 por, D p19 N 18 '88 por, p8 F 25 '89 por, D p23 F 26 '89; *N Y Times Mag* p31+ Ap 30 '89 pors; *Time* 133:27+ Mr 20 '89 pors; *U S News* 106:18+ Ja 23 '89 por; *Washington Post* B p6 Ap 22 '86 por



Claiborne, Liz

Mar. 31, 1929—Fashion designer; businesswoman. Address: Liz Claiborne, Inc., 1441 Broadway, New York, N.Y. 10018

Officially known as Elisabeth Claiborne Ortenberg, Liz Claiborne is the founder, president, chief executive officer, and chairwoman of Liz Claiborne, Inc., a billion-dollar corporation with innovative management that provides quality career clothes with uncommon style at moderate prices. After a twenty-five-year career as a designer for other Seventh Avenue firms, Liz Claiborne founded a small company with her husband, Arthur Ortenberg, and her partners Leonard Boxer and Jerome Chazen in 1976, and she soon commandeered the hearts and pocketbooks of working women with her affordable, casual, mix-and-match sportswear separates. Tagged as the