

InterPositive Media presents

BOOGIE MAN: The Lee Atwater Story

Produced and Directed by Stefan Forbes
Produced by Noland Walker and Tia Wou

And featuring Ed Rollins, Michael Dukakis, Tucker Eskew, Howard
Fineman, Mary Matalin, Sam Donaldson and others

Running time: 86 minutes

To download stills, film clips, and press notes:
<http://www.boogiemanfilm.com/PressKit/>

*"Can you understand American politics if you don't understand Lee Atwater?
I believe not." - Tucker Eskew, Senior McCain/Palin Advisor*

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PRODUCTION NOTES

Boogie Man is a surprising look at Lee Atwater, the blues-playing rogue whose rambunctious rise from the South to Chairman of the GOP made him a household name. He mentored Karl Rove and George W. Bush and played a crucial role in the elections of Reagan and George H.W. Bush. He wrote the Republican Party's winning playbook which the McCain campaign is currently using.

In eye-opening interviews with Atwater's closest friends and enemies, **Boogie Man** re-examines Atwater's crucial role in the remaking of the Republican Party. To Democrats offended by his cutthroat style (to say nothing of the 1988 Willie Horton controversy), Atwater was a lying, race-baiting political assassin dubbed by one Congresswoman "the most evil man in America." But to most Republicans he remains a hero for his deep understanding of the American heartland, his expert manipulation of the media, his keen manipulation of class resentment and cultural wedge issues, and his unapologetic vision of politics as war. Director Stefan Forbes offers a timeless documentary as he examines the charming yet Machiavellian godfather of the modern negative political campaign.

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT:

I first became fascinated with Lee Atwater in 1989 when I saw him on TV, playing the blues at an Inaugural Gala. He was mugging shamelessly in his blue blazer while fronting a line-up of some of the greatest African-American musicians this country has produced, as if he hadn't been responsible for the most racially-charged Presidential campaign in 150 years. Who was this guy? The more I learned about Lee Atwater, the more his contradictions intrigued me.

Atwater's life has been likened to Greek tragedy, and despite the hyperbole, the comparison may be apt. He had that dizzying rise from humble roots which seems to tempt the gods, accompanied by a grotesquely tragic fall. Music in Atwater's life serves as the Greek chorus, commenting on the action and expressing fears and secrets. After all, he was a would-be bluesman, preternaturally attuned to the vibrations of America's nerve endings, plucking a gritty melody at the crossroads of class and race.

I wondered: how could a Southerner with a deep resentment of Eastern elites ally himself with the Bushes, that WASPiest of American dynasties? It was compelling to cull through hundreds of hours of archival footage, some of it never televised, at times like watching hilarious home movies of the Bush family. In *Boogie Man* we witness George W. finding his feet under Atwater's expert tutelage.

Some of the footage is still incendiary, such as the unaired interview I discovered in which Lee, incredibly, denies to Leslie Stahl any knowledge of the racially-charged Willie Horton commercial. Lee's close friend and associate, GOP operative Roger Stone, accuses him in the film of illegally funneling millions of dollars to the Political Action Committee which produced the Horton ad. This contention addresses a long-standing political mystery and deserves to be re-

examined in the media. I also uncovered a very different story about some classic American political moments such as Reagan's 1980 primary victory, the *Tank Ad*, the *Revolving Door* ad, and George H.W. Bush's incendiary 1989 Inaugural Speech, all of which I'm convinced have been misunderstood by political historians and the press.

While making *Boogie Man* I became amazed at the long shadow Atwater casts over American politics. In 2021 Atwater's legacy lives on in the legacy of Donald Trump, a man whose political viability Atwater alone had foreseen, going so far as to suggest Trump for VP to then-baffled George H.W. Bush. Atwater understood the power of showmanship and media. Trump was surely watching when Atwater held a master class in making politics personal with the relentless mockery of Dukakis which proved irresistible to the press. Atwater drew on his own Southern bone-deep resentment of elites to expertly cast Dukakis as a far-left, unelectable quasi-socialist who would take Americans' guns away. And Atwater masterfully played on ancient racial fears, keeping racist messages just below the surface in advertisements where his opponents would be hard-put to condemn them. He also used the media as an echo chamber, as they repeatedly showed clips from the Horton ad for free, further driving home his powerful fear-based messaging.

I thank Lee Atwater's inner circle for generously sharing their memories and precious photographs with me. Their compelling recollections humanize a man whom many viewers might revile, and bring humor and insight to the full story of Lee's surprising life, tragic death, and profound influence over the way we elect our Presidents.

-- Stefan Forbes

BIOS:

Stefan Forbes, Producer/Director/Cinematographer/Editor

Stefan Forbes is an Emmy-nominated Director. His award-winning documentary *One More Dead Fish*, about renegade fishermen in Nova Scotia struggling to survive globalization, was broadcast on PBS. He has written and directed Emmy-nominated, award-winning national PSA campaigns featuring Gwyneth Paltrow, Charlize Theron, Mike Myers, Susan Sarandon, Matthew Broderick, and others. Formerly a cinematographer, he shot 5 feature films and created a look for several hit TV shows. Mr. Forbes is a 2006 New York Foundation for the Arts Fellow and the winner of the IDA's Emerging Filmmaker Award. *Boogie Man* is his debut feature as director.

Noland Walker, Producer

Noland Walker is an Emmy and Peabody Award-winning filmmaker who wrote and co-produced the acclaimed documentary, *Jonestown: The Life and Death of Peoples Temple*. He co-produced and co-directed *Citizen King*, about the last years of Martin Luther King's life for PBS's *American Experience* series. Walker has written and/or directed several documentary films that have aired nationally on PBS, including an episode of the groundbreaking 1998 series, *Africans in America*.

CAST (in order of appearance, with selected quotes):

Tucker Eskew – former Atwater aide, Senior Advisor, McCain Campaign 2008

“Can you understand American politics if you don’t understand Lee Atwater? I believe not.”

“Lee had a kind of ‘We’ll show them’ strength to him that was about as wide as his backbone. Resentment became the destiny of the Republican Party.”
“Did he give his opponents ammunition to criticize him for negative tactics? Yes. Does that obscure the fact that he outfoxed them at nearly every turn?”

“Race is a powder keg...Lee got close to that powder keg and was setting off sparks nearby.”

Howard Fineman - Senior Political Writer, Newsweek

“Lee was an attractive figure to cover, because he could wink and nod with the reporters, saying ‘We all know what a phony deal this is, right?’ By saying it’s all wrestling, he used his own cynicism to anesthetize people to what was really going on.”

Joe Conason - Journalist, Salon.com, The Nation

“Atwater perceived, long before anyone else in American politics did, that the biggest threat to Bush was a guy from Arkansas named Bill Clinton. The idea was to dirty up Clinton, to do enough damage to him that he would simply be too damaged to run for President. Distract and divert. Atwater started transforming politics into a series of tabloid moments in a way that was incredibly powerful for the Republicans.”

Joe Sligh – Lifelong friend & band-mate

Jim McCabe - Lifelong friend

Eric Alterman - Journalist, Professor

“Race is poison, but it’s poison that works for their side. People vote their fears and not their hopes, and Lee understood that.”

Christopher Stark - Chairman, NJ College Republicans

Henry Eichel -Columnist, NC Observer

Chuck Jackson - R&B recording artist, Atwater friend

Tom Turnipseed - SC State Senator 1974 -1978, Atwater opponent

Lee Bandy - Political Journalist, The State, SC

Jack Bass, PhD - Political Science Professor, College of Charleston

Sam Donaldson - White House Correspondent 1977-1988

“An operative never comes and says ‘here is a story I’d like you to run for me, but just in private conversation, did you know this about so and so, we’re still checking it mind you, but, but it’s probably going to turn out to be

true.' Well, you don't want to be beaten by your competition and wait until they announce it. They put it on the conveyer belt and you just run it out."

Ed Rollins - Campaign Manager, Reagan 1984

"Bush could eat the pork rinds but he was a Yale and an elite and he may have lived in Texas, but people still thought of him from Connecticut. Lee was the one who understood the country."

Roger Stone - Republican Political Operative/Atwater colleague

Robert Novak - TV Host, Columnist

"He tried to get me to write about Governor Dukakis having psychiatric problems but it really was a slander. He thought my weakness was that if I could get an exclusive story, I would jump at it, bite at it and not be as careful as I should be. That may be true, but I was careful enough not to get involved in that one."

Terry McAuliffe - DNC Chairman 2001-2005

"When Bill Clinton got elected President, and you had wackos out there funding all these crazy projects, it all started with Lee Atwater. The first independent council said there was nothing there - to think they paid Ken Starr and his perverted investigations \$70 million of taxpayers' money? These folks believe you win at all cost."

Mary Matalin - Atwater Aide 1988

"They had to kill the messenger because they couldn't kill the message. They had to turn him into the Boogie Man. Satan incarnate."

Rich Peterson – Lifelong Atwater friend, RNC Staff, 1989-1990

Governor Michael Dukakis - Democratic Presidential Nominee 1988

"If I had beaten the old man, maybe you would've never heard of the kid. So maybe it's all my fault."

Ishmael Reed - Novelist/Media critic/journalist, The Nation

Kitty Dukakis – Wife of Governor Michael Dukakis

Tom DeLay - House Majority leader, 2003 - 2006

"They did what they normally do with somebody who stands up and fights

for what he believes in, and that is try and destroy him personally, but it didn't bother [Atwater] a bit. He just kept on going."

ARCHIVAL FOOTAGE:

Lee Atwater – legendary political operative, GOP Chairman

Ronald Reagan – President

"I'm not going to pick on an invalid." (referring to Mike Dukakis)

Bryant Gumbel – Host, Today Show

Lee, one network called you the architect of the evil campaign. You are proud this morning of the achievement. Are you as proud of the tactics?

George H.W. Bush - President

"He couldn't teach me rhythm, but he taught the Democrats to sing the blues, and I believe they're just starting."

George W. Bush – operative, Bush '88 campaign

Strom Thurmond – U.S. Senator, NC

Dan Rather – Anchorman, CBS News

Karl Rove – Candidate for Chairman, College Republicans

"Lee Atwater was part myth, part showman, and part political mastermind. He was one of the most unique people I've ever met in my life."

Dick Cheney – U.S. Congressman, WY

Ann Richards – Governor, TX

Ted Kennedy – U.S. Senator, Massachusetts

Bob Dole – Presidential Candidate

"I don't comment on Atwater."

Mario Cuomo – Governor, NY

“Dukakis wins big everywhere. Not only will he win, he is going to win in a landslide. I think he will win in every part of this country.”

Marvin Bush – operative, Bush '88 campaign

Jim Baker – Secretary of State

“He referred to himself as Machiavellian, and he was. In the very best sense of that term.”

CREDITS:

Producer/Director/Cinematographer/Editor

Stefan Forbes

Producer

Noland Walker

Associate Producer

Tia Wou

Musical Score

Stefan Forbes

Tim Robert

Additional Cinematography

Stephen McCarthy

Brett Wiley

Sound Editors

Margaret Crimmins

Scott Cannizzaro

Greg Smith

Editorial Consultants

Tia Wou

Arianna Bocco

Brendan MacDonald

Sound Recordists

Mario Cardenas

Paul Cote

Antonio Arroyo

Archival Research

Dennis Towns

Elissa Birke

Jenni Schalk

Danuta Forbes

Allie Meyer

Soundtrack Featuring

Wandering Child, Bad Man Walking

Gov't Mule

Mother Earth, Thorazine Shuffle

Pick Robin Clean

Elijah Wald

The P-Man

Johnny Hoy & the Bluefish

Additional Editing

Emir Lewis

Archival Assistant Editor

Gerard Fleurima

Production Assistants

Chavala Madlena

Gaia Fillicori

Jack Carroll

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