

## Boogie Man Discussion Guide

### intro

What historical information did you learn from this film? What emotions did it elicit? Did you feel empathy for Lee Atwater?

Former Atwater intern Tucker Eskew says "You can't understand American politics if you don't understand Lee Atwater." Do you agree? What classic American traits does Atwater embody? What adjectives would you use to describe him?

Director Stefan Forbes has referred to the title *Boogie Man* as a triple-entendre. What different meanings might this phrase have?

What relevance does this film have to recent political campaigns? Are these connections obvious? Would you have preferred the film spell them out more, or do you prefer films that allow the viewers to make connections themselves?

### the rebel

Do you believe Atwater was anti-establishment, as he claims? If so, how? Do you feel there's irony in his use of the term? What other ironies do you find in his life and career?

Ed Rollins compares Atwater to Billy the Kid. To what other figures in politics, literature and film might you compare him? Is Atwater a hero or an anti-hero, in the classic definitions of the terms?

### the backlash

What did Strom Thurmond teach Atwater about race, class, and wedge issues? What positive effects did he have on Atwater? What negative ones? Did resentment, as Tucker Eskew states, really become the future of the Republican party? If so, how? What were the causes of this resentment? Did things like the Civil Rights movement and LBJ's Great Society program play a part in it?

Howard Fineman says Atwater made the GOP a Southern party. What were the consequences of this? Did Lee's empowerment of Southern evangelicals play a key role in later elections? How did the primacy of the South impact the electoral map for Republicans?

What is journalistic objectivity? Is this documentary made with a suitable amount of it? Does it give Atwater's friends and critics both ample room to speak? Do you

prefer that documentaries ask challenging questions? Refrain from controversial topics? Stick to generally-held beliefs? Give under-represented viewpoints equal airing? Have a strong point of view or stay 'neutral'?

### **history in the making**

What might Karl Rove have learned from Atwater in their 1973 College Republicans campaign? Which later Presidential campaigns might Lee have affected through Karl?

Karl Rove's speech about Lee Atwater in the film took place at the annual Lee Atwater Gala Dinner at the College Republicans Convention. Do you feel that Atwater's status as a hero to many College Republicans makes them more effective than their Democratic counterparts? What are the cultural differences between College Republicans and College Democrats?

### **the 70's**

What did Atwater learn that his Democratic opponents didn't?

### **divide & conquer**

What does Atwater's effective use of the phrase "hooked up to jumper cables" demonstrate about the media? Was Atwater's use of this juicy phrase echoed in other campaigns? Did rumors of mental illness factor into other elections?

### **1980 reagan's in trouble**

Are you surprised by the ongoing lack of media coverage of Atwater's racially-charged deceptions in helping Reagan to victory in South Carolina?

### **bad man walking**

Do you believe the tragic childhood death of Atwater's younger brother may have influenced Lee's psyche and political tactics? Or do you find this to be speculative 'armchair psychology'? What else might have driven Lee Atwater? Simply a love of politics and a distinctly American desire to win at any cost?

Do you agree with Atwater's belief that "wrestling is the only honest sport in town?" To what degree do you agree with him that politics is 'rigged' in favor of the powerful and well-connected?

### **1988 primary – get rid of dole**

What tactics did Lee use against Bob Dole? Did you see a moment in the campaign where George H.W. Bush's whole attitude changed? What about George W. Bush?

## **1988 general election - people vote their fears**

Roger Stone says Atwater's 1988 platform was an early example of the culture war. Do you agree? How so? What wedge issues did Atwater use? How might candidates effectively counter these techniques?

Did you enjoy hearing journalist Henry Eichel comment on "quiche in a can"? Director Stefan Forbes has said that he filmed subjects watching historical footage in an effort to bring history to life and encourage a dialogue with the past. What other non-standard documentary filmmaking techniques did you notice? What effect did they have?

What were the two different Willie Horton TV ads? Do you agree that the Bush campaign ad used subconscious racist fear appeals? Do you believe both ads were racist? One? Neither? What deep American fears and racial iconography did the imagery and language concerning Willie Horton activate and reference, especially concerning African-American masculinity and rape?

How might the media have commented on the Willie Horton controversy without being used as an echo chamber to spread racial fear?

Reporters in the film tread very lightly when questioning Lee concerning Willie Horton, using the phrases "tinge of racism" and "hints of racism". Yet Republican operative Roger Stone flatly calls the unofficial Bush campaign ad racist. What accounts for this disparity?

Should Roger Stone's claims that the Bush campaign illegally funded the 'independent' Willie Horton ad be further investigated?

### **demoralization**

Do you feel that George H.W. Bush should be held accountable for the racial messages in his 1988 campaign? Do you feel his Inaugural speech's veiled language such as "there are those who cannot free themselves of whatever addiction; drugs, welfare, the demoralization that rules the slums" were racist and stigmatized African-American communities? Or do you find the speech Presidential and deserving of its place in history for its 'kinder, gentler' rhetoric about 'a thousand points of light'? Do you feel this rhetoric has received enough critical attention from historians?

Conservative commentator Robert Novak claims Democrats are sincere while "Republicans tend to be people who don't believe in anything. They just want to win elections." Is this true? Why would a conservative say this?

Ishmael Reed speaks of the disconnect between Atwater's obsession with African-American culture and the racial messaging of the 1988 race. (For his thoughts on Norman Mailer's theory of the White Negro, watch the additional interviews.) Do you think Atwater suffered inner conflict on this issue? What other

conflicts and ironies can be found in Atwater's life?

### **1989 – tabloid moments**

Terry McAuliffe, Rich Peterson, and Joe Conason discuss Atwater's influence on the GOP's efforts to sabotage Bill Clinton, which led to the well-funded Arkansas Project. Do you find it ironic that Atwater, a Southerner, fought so hard against a fellow Southerner on behalf of a Northern WASP such as George H.W. Bush? Do you feel that Atwater influenced GOP members of the 'Class of '94' such as Newt Gingrich and Tom DeLay?

Which moments in *Boogie Man* suggest that the media share blame for the 'tabloidization' of American politics?

Where do you see traces of Atwater's influence in the careers of his protégées? Joe Conason says Atwater taught George W. Bush that winning is everything. Karl Rove calls Atwater "part myth, part mastermind." Atwater also mentored Mary Matalin, who became a Senior Advisor to Dick Cheney, and Tucker Eskew, who ran George W. Bush's war room in the 2000 South Carolina primary against McCain and became Director of Global Communications for W.'s White House, controlling global messaging in the "War on Terror". He later became a Senior Advisor to Sarah Palin. Eskew says Atwater was the first guy I ever heard say... "perception is reality". Can you point to episodes in these politicians' careers that demonstrate Atwater's influence?

Did you find it ironic that after defeating so many experienced and well-financed enemies, Atwater suffered a major setback at the hands of young college students (at Howard University)?

### **1990 – the final campaign**

Do you believe Lee Atwater "repented" for his actions? Which ones? Which interviewees do you find most credible on this subject? On other subjects? Howard Fineman? Mary Matalin? Eric Alterman? Chuck Jackson?

Do you feel Ed Rollins' story about a Bible wrapped in cellophane negates Atwater's entire quest for redemption? Does the film present evidence on both sides?

### **april fool's day**

What is the Lee Atwater playbook? What percentage of Lee's success would you ascribe to dirty tricks, 'outfoxing' his opponents, hard work, expert use of the culture war/wedge politics/racial fear tactics? Which politicians, from any party, have successfully defended against such tactics?

Hillary Clinton, John McCain, and Sarah Palin were all accused of using the Atwater playbook against Obama in 2008. Do you believe they did? In which

ways? (For more on this, please visit the [BoogieManFilm.com](http://BoogieManFilm.com) Politics & Film blog.)

Could George H.W. Bush have won in 1988 without Atwater? What about his son in 2000 and 2004? What about Reagan in 1980? Does it say more about our political system or about human nature that one man might have such an impact on world history?

Mary Matalin says "when you have a talent as deep as Atwater's and Rove's...losing a battle is not losing the war, and they don't go away." Do you think the Atwater playbook may decide future Presidential elections? How did Atwater's insight help lead to Trump?

In 1988, Atwater submitted Donald Trump's name as a potential VP. Historian Jon Meacham, writes in *Destiny and Power: The American Odyssey of George Herbert Walker Bush* that the 41st president considered the idea "strange and unbelievable." What did Atwater intuit about American culture and politics that helped him predict Trump's viability as a candidate? Did Atwater help create the conditions for Trump to win the Presidency?