



Bad Boy: The Life And Politics Of Lee Atwater

By John Brady

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Lee Atwater revolutionized presidential campaigning. He helped to create a solid Republican south. And he became notorious for turning national politics back into a blood sport, not only using nasty attacks but reveling in his image as the bad boy of Washington. Then, at the age of 39, Atwater was struck by a brain tumor. In thirteen months, cancer ended the most controversial career in modern politics—the charismatic, colorful, and contradictory life of Lee Atwater. Even today Atwater is a fallen leader Republicans love and a rival Democrats love to hate. He was the first political handler as mediagenic as his candidates—certainly the first chairman of the Republican National Committee to record a blues album. His campaigns represent the high-water mark of the GOP's postwar dominance of the presidency, and his techniques set the tone for races across the country. Watching Washington since his death, politicians and pundits still wonder, *What if Lee Atwater had lived?* *Bad Boy* reveals how Lee Atwater began his career controlling crowds as jittery class clown, traumatized by the agonizing death of his little brother. In college he discovered the subtle intercourse of policy and public opinion and grew from party animal to party man. *Bad Boy* details Atwater's political strategies from the grass roots to the national level. Even more ruthless were the behind-the-scenes power games as he crossed paths, and occasionally crossed swords, with nearly every major Republican of the 1980s: Reagan, Bush, Baker, Ailes, Rollins, and many more. In *Bad Boy*, we also see the faces Atwater tried to spin away. He was a compulsive womanizer, climbing through windows to avoid reporters. He played radical politics but promoted "big tent" Republicanism. Even his last public moment is controversial. Did Atwater's deathbed words really repudiate entire campaigns, or were they twisted by political enemies and second-hand reporting? Was his repentance sincere or simply one last gasp of press manipulation? Was he responsible for the infamous Willie Horton ads, or was he unfairly blamed by 1988s losers, trying for a moral victory? Is Lee Atwater, a master of spin, now being spun in his grave? In its sudden end, Atwater's remarkable life resembled the rise and fall of a fine political novel. With the probing insights of an expert interviewer and a rare stylistic verve, John Brady tells that whole frantic, fascinating story—the life of the baddest boy in D.C.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

An equally apt title for this would be *Anatomy of a Politico*, for in reading this life of the man who made negative campaigning a household word, introduced the concept of the permanent campaign and is credited with helping Bush beat Dukakis in 1988 with the Willy Horton issue (about a pardoned recidivist), one senses that Atwater lived for little else than politics. While claiming that no one knew Atwater well, Brady (*The Craft of Interviewing*) fleshes out the life of South Carolina-born Harvey Leroy (Lee) Atwater with pertinent aspects of his upbringing, marriage and life in politics. He details the rise of Atwater from greenhorn to Beltway insider, where he became chairman of the Republican National Committee, "the first professional political consultant to head either political party." A strength of Brady's presentation is that he lets readers decide what they think of his protagonist, by whom he seems fascinated, though not to the point of losing his objectivity. Although there's more dope here than some might wish, a full-bodied view emerges of the man whom brain cancer struck down at age 40 in 1991, when he was near the height of his powers. Copyright 1996 Reed Business Information, Inc.

From Library Journal

Prior to his death from cancer at age 40 in 1991, Republican campaign manager Lee Atwater was one of the most admired and hated men in American politics. His greatest accomplishment was guiding Vice President George Bush to a comeback victory over Democratic nominee Michael Dukakis in 1988. Bush's comeback was partially the result of Atwater's skillful use of "attack" television commercials directed at Dukakis's record as governor of Massachusetts. Even before the 1988 campaign Atwater had acquired a reputation for negative and mean-spirited campaigning. Journalist Brady's biography not only documents Atwater's considerable political talents but also examines the often manipulative relationships that were a major part of Atwater's professional and private lives. Brady does not present sufficient evidence to justify his characterization of Atwater as "the best political campaign manager who ever lived," but his book is an excellent introduction for lay readers to the career of a man who helped define the modern political campaign. Thomas H. Ferrell, Univ. of Southwestern Louisiana, Lafayette
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From [Booklist](#)

Republican media-meister Lee Atwater was so successful that his political foes credited him with coups such as the notorious Willie Horton ads, for which he wasn't responsible. His real accomplishments, less flashy, were more lasting. As party chairman, he changed the GOP from the invitation-only cotillion it often seemed to be into today's "big tent." Remarkably astute, he knew early on that he wanted to run Ronald Reagan's campaign. "In 1979 no one could tell how the Gipper would play south of the Mason-Dixon line," Brady says, but even when asked by mentor Strom Thurmond, Atwater turned down working for fellow southerner John Connally's presidential bid and, making a classic political match, became Reagan's South Carolina campaign manager. Brady gives a full portrait of Atwater, a man so devoted to politics he let it override concern for his pregnant wife and who spent his poignant last days vainly battling cancer. Love him or hate him, his story is an attention-grabber. *Mike Tribby*

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Donna Macdonald:

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