

InterPositive Media presents

BOOGIE MAN: The Lee Atwater Story

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

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

Running time: 87 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 modern playbook.

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 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 hot-button issues in the American heartland, his expert manipulation of the media, and his unapologetic vision of politics as war. Director Stefan Forbes offers a timely documentary for this election year 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 achieved that dizzying rise from humble roots which seems to tempt tragedy. Music in Atwater's life serves as the Greek chorus, commenting on the action and expressing fears and secrets. After all, he was a bluesman, preternaturally attuned to the vibrations of America's nerve endings, plucking a gritty melody at the crossroads of class and race.

It was fascinating to cull through hundreds of hours of archival footage, some of it never televised. At times it was like watching hilarious home movies of the Bush family. In *Boogie Man* we witness startling and humorous footage of 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 the truth behind some classic American political moments such as Reagan's racially-charged 1980 primary victory involving illegal shenanigans, the 1988

Revolving Door ad, and George H.W. Bush's 1989 Inaugural Speech, all of which I'm convinced have been grievously misunderstood by political historians and the press.

While researching *Boogie Man* I became amazed at the long shadow Atwater casts over our politics. He's the godfather of modern negative campaigning, the man who made 'liberal' a dirty word, a master of the divisive 'wedge issue', and a trend-setting practitioner of the politics of mockery, distortion and resentment that defeated Gore in 2000, Kerry in 2004, and health care reform in 2010.

Atwater saw that the Southern fundamentalist preachers could be a game-changer in national politics. In 1988 he deputized George W. Bush to make common cause with them, helping sweep Bush père to power. Gaining ever-greater influence in the intervening decades, this rural, religious, mostly Southern and white voting bloc empowered the Rush Limbaughs and Sarah Palins of the GOP while silencing less-radical voices. Today, their emotional appeals to voters' racial fears and economic resentments have further polarized the American electorate. As Atwater protégé and Palin Senior Advisor Tucker Eskew says in *Boogie Man*, "Resentment became the future of the Republican Party."

The grand ironies in Atwater's life abound. I've often wondered how a Southerner with such a bone-deep mistrust of elites could ally himself with the Bushes, that WASPiest of American families. How could a man who idolized James Brown and released his own Grammy-nominated R&B album have run the most racist Presidential campaign in 150 years? How could a man so charming and beloved by his friends be considered so loathsome – indeed, *evil* - by his enemies? And how could the most unrepentant cynic in American politics apologize to those he'd destroyed, while embarking on a controversial deathbed search for redemption? Battling cancer, Lee became disfigured and grotesque while suddenly seeking internal beauty, in one of the most fascinating third acts in American life.

Introducing *Boogie Man* at the 2008 Republican National Convention, GOP

operative Roger Stone described Lee's primary trait as pragmatism, saying "If Marxism could have won elections, Lee would have been Marxist." Hyperbole aside, this should give pause to those who would blame Atwater for the myriad sins of American politics. Atwater appealed to what was worst in America because he knew it would work. If it did, shouldn't that indict some others besides him?

I thank Lee Atwater's inner circle for generously sharing their memories and precious photographs with me. Their compelling recollections humanize a man with whom many viewers might not readily empathize, 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 2008 winner of the IDA's Jacqueline Donnet Emerging Filmmaker Award. His socially conscious production company InterPositive Media was named one of RealScreen magazine's Global Top 100 Production Companies. *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*.

Tia Wou, Producer

Tia Wou is a film producer, entrepreneur, and founder of Tote Le Monde.

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

Producers

Tia Wou, Noland Walker

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

Dennis Towns

Archival Research

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

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