

InterPositive Media presents

**BOOGIE MAN:  
The Lee Atwater Story**

Produced and Directed by Stefan Forbes  
Produced by Noland Walker

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:  
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## PRODUCTION NOTES

**Boogie Man** is a comprehensive 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 key 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 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, 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 had that dizzying rise from humble roots which seems to tempt the gods, accompanied by a 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 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, it was like watching hilarious home movies of the Bush family, witnessing George W. find 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 solves a long-standing political mystery and deserves to be examined in the media.

While making *Boogie Man* I became amazed at the long shadow Atwater casts over American politics, and the eerie similarities of the 1988 campaign to our

current one. John McCain denounced Atwater's playbook after being destroyed by Atwater acolytes such as Tucker Eskew in the 2000 South Carolina primary. But in 2008, McCain has hired those same operatives and is running a remarkably similar campaign. What might his team have learned from 1988?

After 8 years of a Republican administration increasingly dogged by scandal, Atwater masterfully avoided issues and appealed to voters' emotions and fears. His relentless mockery of Dukakis proved irresistible to the press, dominating the national discourse and rendering Dukakis' attempt to 'rise above' it wholly futile. He drew on his own Southern bone-deep resentment of elites to expertly cast the fiscally conservative Dukakis as a far-left, unelectable liberal. And he masterfully played on ancient racial fears, keeping them just below the surface where his opponents would be hard-put to respond. He also used the media as an echo chamber, as they repeatedly showed clips from the Horton ad for free.

Boogie Man explains Atwater's playbook, which has inspired a new generation of Republican strategists yet remains surprisingly misunderstood by most Democrats. Atwater's techniques prevailed not just in 1988, but in 2000, 2004, and 2008. (Interestingly, while the GOP lost in 1992, the no-holds-barred media campaign Atwater launched against Bill Clinton from the RNC in 1989 served to undermine the Clinton Presidency.) In an election year that is already one of the most negative in recent memory, Lee's life story is hotly contested cultural ground.

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 and tragic death. Atwater casts a long shadow 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. As a union cinematographer, he has shot 5 feature films and created a look for several hit TV shows. Forbes is a 2006 New York Foundation for the Arts Fellow. *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...And 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:**

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