PS for 4/18/91

Lee Atwater: New Myths and Old Realities

With their potential presidential candidates in disarray under the lash of George Bush's 90 percent popularity rating in the polls, the liberals have grabbed Lee Atwater's death like a drowning man lunging at a floating log. With their pals in the media, they are engaged in putting a false "spin" on the event of Leers untimely death.

The Atwater image now being crafted is that he was an architect of nasty and negative campaigning, and that, in the face of death, he recanted, admitted he had wronged such enemies as Michael Dukakis, and asked forgiveness for his political sins.

Throughout November and December of 1988, we were inflicted with unremitting media criticism of Bush's 1988 presidential campaign: we were told it was so negative that it "turned off" the voters. Now that Lee Atwater can't defend himself, the media liberals have decided to use him to prove their interpretation of campaign history.

But it's all a lie. Atwater didn't invent nasty campaigning, he didn't retract his tactics, and he shouldn't have.

Lee Atwater was not a complicated guy. He loved politics (which is OK), and he also loved to win (which is not "politically correct," according to the liberal media, if you are conservative). In his spare time, he liked to play rhythn-and-b1ues on the guitar.

Negative hard-ball campaigning was invented, in modern times, by a young Texas aide to Lyndon Johnson named Bill Moyers. This is the same Bill Moyers who in recent years has afflicted us with so many insufferably sanctimonious specials on tax-supported PBS-TV.

Johnson and Moyers set out to smear Barry Goldwater in 1964 by accusing him of being a trigger-happy warmonger. The tool to accomplish this was the fa1se, cruel, and unfair television spot showing a litt1e girl picking daisy petals during the countdown and then disappearing into a mushroom cloud. Nothing in the l-988 campaign approached the viciousness of that 1964 ad.

Atwater didn't invent Wi1lie Horton. The **Reader's Digest** discovered him and put his true story in 12 million homes in its July 1988 issue. One of the most compelling articles the magazine has ever published, it was aptly entitled “Getting Away With Murder.” Every reference to Willie Horton after that was just retelling the **Digest** story to more people.

The TV campaign spot showing Wi1lie Horton, which has been aired so frequently by the liberals in order to criticize it, was not produced under the direction of Atwater or Bush at all. It was made by an independent committee over which Atwater and Bush had no control.

Atwater did produce a TV spot about Dukakis’s furlough issue, but it never pictured Willie Horton. It didn’t even show a black man. It showed unidentified, racially indeterminate prisoners going through a revolving prison door.

The media also used Atwater’s death as an excuse to repeat the falsehood that Michael Dukakis’s prisoner furlough plan was like dozens of furlough procedures in other states. The fact is that the Dukakis furlough plan was unique: Massachusetts was the only one of the 50 states in which a furlough could be given to a murderer who (like Willie Horton) had been sentenced to life imprisonment without possibility of parole.

The other 1988 issue which the media cried around about concerned the pledge of allegiance. The media claimed that it was unfair for Bush and Atwater to criticize Dukakis for vetoing a Massachusetts pledge of allegiance bill because he allegedly was only obeying a Supreme Court ruling.

That is false. The Massachusetts bill that Dukakis vetoed would

have required state-employed teachers to lead their students in reciting the pledge, an issue on which the U.S. Supreme Court has never ruled. The Massachusetts bill imposed no requirement on students, which was the issue in the Supreme Court **Barnette** case.

Both Dukakis’s veto and his furlough policy were wholly proper issues for Bush and Atwater to use because they involved Dukakis's political judgement as a public official. The American people overwhelmingly rejected that judgement as wrong, misguided, and dumb.

The media are also trying to make much ado about the Atwater remark that the Republican Party should be a “big tent.” But this doesn’t mean what the liberals are trying to say it means.

My last meeting with Lee Atwater took place after his “big ten” remark and before he was stricken with his brain tumor a year ago. I said, “Lee, do you think the Republican Party is big enough to accommodate those who favor tax increases?” Quick as a flash, with passion he responded, “Absolutely not.”

If Atwater had still been advising Bush, it is unlikely that the President would have abandoned his “no new taxes” campaign pledge. “No new taxes” was smart politics then, and it still is.

Lee Atwater demonstrated in 1988 what Stormin’ Norman Schwarzkopf demonstrated in 1991, “there is no substitute for victory.” Lee, R.I.P.; you have nothing to apologize for and you are already missed.