

Reading Comprehension

1 What does Fred Kessler mean when he says, “In most states the politicians choose their voters”? What does John Nichols think should be done about it?

2 Why does Katha Pollitt believe that requiring that health plans cover all methods of contraception does not violate Catholic institutions’ religious freedom?

CHECK THE FACTS

Do additional research to find the answers to these questions:

■ How much of the cost of computer production is taken up by labor and assembly costs? How does this compare to other products manufactured in China or other low-wage nations? Is it true, as Alexander Cockburn says, that Apple could afford to build its computers here if it wanted to? Do any other major computer companies maintain manufacturing plants in the US?

■ Read the press accounts of the Haditha massacre, and compare them with the record of the My Lai incident during the Vietnam War. Are the two comparable? How do they compare in terms of punishment dealt out to the soldiers responsible?

YOUR TURN TO DECIDE

■ Who do you think would be the stronger Republican presidential candidate, Newt Gingrich or Mitt Romney? Does a strong primary candidate necessarily mean a candidate who can win a general election in November? What do you think is more important when voting, someone who agrees with your principles, or electability?

■ Look at the press accounts of attendees at this year’s World Economic Forum. Was it fair for Amnesty International’s Salil Shetty to declare at Davos: “A lot of the people who caused this crisis are walking around here now”? To what degree is the world economic crisis a systemic failure, and how much should individual political and business leaders be expected to take responsibility for creating it?

VOCABULARY

DEFINE THE TERMS IN BOLD.

[PAGE 3]

“... an ‘epidemic of **gerrymandering** [that] poses a growing threat to our democracy.”

[PAGE 3]

“...thus, even in ‘wave’ years, when ‘change’ is the **watchword**...”

[PAGE 3]

“...it is the **decennial** apportionment process that disenfranchises the most Americans...”

[PAGE 3]

“...for its **pernicious** racial slant in the South, see Ari Berman on page 11...”

[PAGE 4]

“...appear likely to force a less **egregious** compromise.”

[PAGE 4]

“But for every success in **tempering** discriminatory plans, there has been a defeat elsewhere.”

[PAGE 4]

“...the voices of the Republican establishment rose in anger and **consternation**...”

[PAGE 6]

“...that would lay bare his **copious** vulnerabilities.”

[PAGE 6]

“The erratic, ethically challenged, philandering, thrice-married **megalomaniac**...”

[PAGE 6]

“...using the occasion of his victory lap in Florida to **evinced** his lack of concern for the ‘very poor’...”

[PAGE 6]

“Strange as it may seem, debates on the dangers of rising income inequality are now **de rigueur**...”

[PAGE 8]

“The message: inequality is no longer just a social or ethical issue but an economic blight that will **stymie** recovery.”

[PAGE 9]

“So there’s nothing **irrevocable** about the job loss.”

[PAGE 10]

“...in December it was **licentious** children; now it’s the anti-contraception clergy.”

[PAGE 17]

“Only by reading the **voluminous** lawsuits filed against the state...”



The Nation Classroom *For the Teacher*

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Reading Comprehension:

1 By redrawing district lines, state legislatures can tip the scales to all but guarantee that no significant block of voters will remain in their district to oppose them. The result has been a system where in Massachusetts Republicans are almost never elected, while the same fate awaits Democrats in Nebraska, though in both cases the minority party draws more than one third of the votes. Having nonpartisan commissions set district lines would be one solution; another would be to create “superdistricts” that would allow voters to be represented in public office in proportion to their actual numbers.

2 Nearly everyone ends up paying for things that violate their religious or ethical beliefs, whether pacifists being taxed for war spending or Scientologists having their tax dollars spent on psychiatric services. Moreover, the Catholic church runs programs that employ and serve numerous non-Catholics, often using public funds. Catholic institutions in eight states have come to terms with requirements that they cover contraception in their health plans; those in the other 42 should be able to handle the same requirement.

Vocabulary:

gerrymandering: setting electoral districts to give an advantage to one group or political party
• **watchword:** term that serves as a slogan or motto
• **decennial:** occurring every ten years
• **pernicious:** highly destructive
• **egregious:** blatantly wrong or unfair
• **tempering:** softening the impact of
• **consternation:** dismayed amazement
• **copious:** abundant, present in large quantities
• **megalomaniac:** convinced of one’s own omnipotence
• **evince:** show evidence of
• **de rigueur:** required by custom
• **stymie:** stand in the way of
• **irrevocable:** unable to be revoked or altered
• **licentious:** unrestrained by moral concerns
• **voluminous:** numerous, having great volume

FURTHER READING AND ACTIVITIES

THE GOP’S NEW SOUTHERN STRATEGY, (PP. 11–17): Discuss the original “Southern strategy” launched by the Republican party in the 1960s. Does the current gerrymandering qualify as an extension of this? Discuss the history of gerrymandering (including how it got its name); what attempts have been made over the years to rein it in, and how successful have they been? Conduct a gerrymandering roleplay with your class: Randomly hand out cards reading Democratic, Republican, or Swing to students, then determine the best method to break up the class into five districts in a way that will maximize the chances of one party winning the most seats. What rules could be put in place to prevent this? Why is it to the Republicans’ benefit to have only people of color representing the Democratic Party in the South? Does this strategy rely solely on racism to be effective, or are there other factors at work? Research the legislative districts in your state. Do they match up well with geography and demographics? Do you think they should be redrawn? Have your students research the recent Texas redistricting battle. Was the Supreme Court right in throwing out the court-designed redistricting plan? Why or why not? If helping Republicans win more races is an “unintended consequence” of making it easier for people of color to be elected by concentrating minority voters in certain districts, which should take priority: racial fairness or electoral fairness? Is this inevitably a tradeoff?

TRANSPARTISAN POLITICS ON THE PLAINS (PP. 18–22): Does the successful campaign against the Keystone XL pipeline indicate that it’s too simplistic to think of “red states” and “blue states,” or even liberals and conservatives? Are there issues in your community that could potentially get voters to build alliances across ideological lines? Investigate and discuss the importance of the Ogallala aquifer—should it be protected from development? How feasible is that? What other examples are there of issues in history that have changed local political affiliations on a broad scale? Are they all positive?

DEPORTED AND FORGOTTEN (PP. 23–26): Research the history of deportations by US immigration services. When did the numbers climb the most dramatically, and why? Which nation receives the most deportees each year? What are the most common reasons for deportations? Should drug law violations or other non-violent offenses be treated the same as violent felonies when considering deportation proceedings? What about criminal offenses for which immigrants have already served their time? Why did Liberia impose mandatory jailing of US deportees until 2008? Do any other nations follow this practice? How much should the US take into consideration how deportees will be treated before sending them to other nations? What, if anything, could the US do to ensure better treatment of deportees? Would providing more information about deportees to local governments help improve treatment on their arrival? Read the documents compiled by the Center for Constitutional Rights on the Secure Communities program (ccrjustice.org/secure-communities). Discuss what policy changes might help alleviate any problems that they reveal.



Learn the truth about how our states were named in Kathy Guyton’s delightful and richly detailed book, *U.S. State Names: The Stories of How Our States Were Named*. www.MountainStormPress.com

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Lee Atwater's Legacy

BY ANTONINO D'AMBROSIO

REBEL. Liar. Manipulator. Mastermind. Sprinkle in a bit of hypocrisy and a ton of opportunism, and you have Harvey Leroy "Lee" Atwater, a key player in the transformation of the Republican Party into the political force it is today. His meteoric rise to the upper echelons of political power was cut short by a fatal brain tumor at the age of 40.

As director Stefan Forbes's smart, revealing new film *Boogie Man: The Lee Atwater Story* shows, Atwater threw away the old Republican playbook and wrote a new one full of dirty tricks aimed not just at winning but at annihilating his opponents. His attack dog style, which included some of the worst political smear campaigns in US history, led to the election of three Republican presidents.

Boogie Man is an important film for those who wonder how the political landscape shifted so dramatically rightward over the past three decades. Forbes gives us an engaging look into the psyche of a person driven mostly by insecurity and a manic desire to win at all costs; he also presents a compelling account of exactly how Atwater lied, cheated and stole his way to power. By choosing to straddle this tenuous narrative line, Forbes draws an absorbing portrait. In less capable hands, Atwater could have been a caricature, as he willfully and shamelessly used racial-scare campaigns to get his candidates elected, but denied being a racist because he played blues guitar and "loved blues music because it was real authentic black music."

Lee Atwater's story begins in South Carolina with the death of his brother, burned to death by boiling grease while Atwater watched helplessly. Atwater later said that he heard his brother's scream every moment of every day for the rest of his life. The tragedy hardened him, giving him a cynical worldview that shaped his political work. While in high school, Atwater ran a friend's campaign for school president and the eventual victory sparked his interest in being the "man behind the man."

As a student at Newberry College, he took charge of the College Republicans National Committee, recognizing the GOP's need to

bring more youth into the party. Under his leadership, the organization became a national force. As his success grew, so did his ambition, and it wasn't long before national Republican leaders took notice. Before leaving school to work for the late South Carolina Senator Strom Thurmond, Atwater orchestrated the campaign of Karl Rove, his protégé, in a bid to take over the College Republicans. Rove eventually won the election after the head of the Republican National Committee, George H.W. Bush, interceded on his behalf. The battle for the 2000 presidential election echoes loudly.

Boogie Man mixes commentaries from a range of political perspectives with fascinating archival footage, breathing life into a story that seems to strain credulity. With a steady hand, Forbes seeks to learn what motivated the man Republican strategist Ed Rollins describes as extremely "insecure" but possessing the "eyes of a killer." Early on, it was Atwater who understood that "people vote their fears, not their hopes"; he did all he could to stoke those fears. The cultural backlash he created wrested power from one party and firmly entrenched it in the hands of another. Look no further than George W. Bush's entire presidency as one shining, painful example of just how successful Atwater was at devising a whole arsenal of tactics aimed at shifting the political discourse away from substantive issues to visceral ones. These tactics now dominate American politics and have served to distort the democratic process. They include push polling (fake surveys conducted by "independent pollsters"), the use of coded language (i.e., "welfare queens") and tapping into white Southern and blue-collar resentment. Of the latter, Atwater acolyte and former deputy director of White House communications Tucker Eskew says, "Resentment became the destiny of the Republican Party, and Lee was adept at tapping into that."

Atwater was more than adept; he was an unrivaled master with a specialty in smear campaigns. Supporting this fact early on in the film is former South Carolina State Senator Tom Turnipseed, who recounts his bitter Congressional bid against Republican incumbent Floyd Spence. Atwater's use of push polls, which linked Turnipseed to the NAACP and claimed he had been "hooked up to jumper cables" as a teen undergoing treatment for

THE NATION DIGITAL ARCHIVE
AN ALTERNATIVE HISTORY...SINCE 1865



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depression, cost Tunipspeed the election. Nearly three decades later, Turnispeed still can't believe Atwater got away with it. "I'm laughing now," Tunsipeed says, "but it's really not funny at all."

Soon after, Atwater went to work for Ronald Reagan, devising a new "Southern strategy" that effectively masked a far more sinister racist campaign. After securing the Republican nomination, Atwater convinced Reagan to kick off his campaign in Philadelphia, Mississippi, in a not-so-subtle attempt to make race a central part of Reagan's presidential bid. It worked. Then in the 1988 presidential race, serving as George H.W. Bush's campaign manager, he produced what many believe to be the most damaging and offensive smear ad in American political history: the Willie Horton "Weekend Passes" ad.

With Bush trailing former Massachusetts Governor Michael Dukakis in the polls, Atwater knew there was no way Bush could win on the issues. So when he learned convicted felon Horton had raped a white woman while on a weekend furlough from a Massachusetts prison, he had the ammunition necessary to attack the Democrats. The Dukakis campaign refused to sink to Atwater's level and did not respond to the ads. Forbes's interview with Dukakis provides an emotional punch; he still seems haunted by the scurrilous attacks. Whether the decision not to fight back was right or wrong pales in comparison to the media's lack of interest in verifying the accuracy of the allegations. Veteran ABC news reporter Sam Donaldson pointedly observes that most of what Atwater was putting out to the American public was "lies." He adds, "We [the media] should have checked every one of the claims they were making and we didn't."

As *Boogie Man* unfolds, it's hard not to ask how Atwater got away with such outrageously dirty tricks. As one of his friends contends, Atwater used the old Southern trick of "slow-playing 'em" and then, with a "wink and a nod," charmed the gullible press. Forbes's film indicts a system that long ago failed to prevent an operative like Lee Atwater from attaining such a powerful level of political influence. It cannot be understated that the Democrats contributed to this political shift, thanks

in large part to their inability to effectively counter Atwater. Perhaps they thought that the American people would see through the con the Republicans were running.

Atwater's bait-and-switch tactics got millions of people to vote for what they felt rather than what they needed; these days, that's known as "people voting against their own interests." Atwater's legacy is profound because the resentment he roused in his short career has flourished, paving the way for reactionary elites to take control of the country, while passing themselves off as the representatives of the "common man."

One of the more telling revelations in Forbes's film is Atwater's lack of any real ideological foundation or intellectual belief in anything he did. He clearly saw politics as a game and played hardball to win. His allegiance was not to a cause or vision of what America should be but to a life-long desire to be the part of "the club." Unfortunately for Atwater, this "club"--the Bush family--saw him as nothing more than a political hit man who did the dirty work they were unwilling to do themselves. Atwater knew this and remained powerless to change it, no matter how many elections he won for the Republicans.

Atwater died in 1991; Rove was heir apparent. His former protégé did not disappoint, delivering the White House to George W. Bush in 2000. Rove's ambitions and the power he ultimately attained surpassed that of his teacher. As *Nation* columnist Eric Alterman explains in the film, "Rove, who learned these tactics at the knee of Lee, moved into the White House, where you have the entire resources of the national government in the services of a political operative. I'd say that's new and rather frightening."

Alterman is right. In the end Atwater, who prided himself as the man behind the curtain too clever to leave any trace of his nefarious political operations, has left his fingerprints all over the American political system. And we are the worse for it, as the country remains paralyzed in a cycle of negative politics and chained to the visceral issues that continue to undermine American democracy. It's the undeniable truth that makes *Boogie Man* such a sobering and timely film.

QUESTIONS

■ How central is race to the current divide of the two main US political parties? Is this the fault of individuals like Lee Atwater and Karl Rove, or at they only exploiting the attitudes of much of the American public? Is there anything that can or should be done to alleviate this dynamic?

■ Should the media be forced to take more responsibility for the continued success of "dirty tricks" like those conducted by Atwater? Where should press coverage draw the line in terms of calling out candidates for public office when they make unfair or racist appeals?



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