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**An End to the Southern Strategy,
But No Post-Racial America
Color of Law
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BlackCommentator.com Editorial Board**

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Lee Atwater, GOP political operative and mentor of Karl Rove, was a Machiavellian conman and a purveyor of sleaze. And through the various political campaigns he ran, he not only won races, but also destroyed lives in the process.

I was reminded of all of this when I watched the recent PBS documentary on Atwater called [Boogie Man: The Lee Atwater Story](#). Even in the already distasteful arena of American politics, Atwater dared to go where few others had ventured. He started his career as a protégé of Sen. Strom Thurmond, someone who thrived on white supremacy and the manipulation of the race card, yet had a Black daughter and concealed his hypocrisy until his death.

Obviously, Atwater learned well from his racist mentor. The father of the modern dirty tricks school of political campaigning, Atwater helped claim victory for Congressman (later Governor) Carroll Campbell by [characterizing his Jewish opponent, Max Heller](#), as someone who "should not be elected because he was not a Christian and did not "believe Jesus Christ has come yet." In addition, Atwater was the mastermind of the infamous Willie Horton ad, which was used for George Bush Sr.'s presidential bid against former Massachusetts Governor Michael Dukakis. The Horton ad — which played on the narrative of the menacing Black man who rapes White women, and in this case was supposedly released from prison by Dukakis— represented the ultimate in the Southern Strategy, that is, the Republican Party's raw, unabashed appeals to White Southerners through the invocation of white-skin solidarity and fear of Black folk. Appointed to Howard University's board of trustees in 1989, then-Republican party chair Atwater was shown the door by Howard's students, in a level of protest not seen on that campus since the Vietnam War. As [Time magazine reported](#):

"Outraged by his appointment in January to the Howard board of trustees, more than 200 students seized the school's main administration building in

the most intense burst of campus unrest since the Viet Nam War. Hundreds of other students demonstrated outside, chanting slogans and demanding Atwater's resignation from the board. Four days after the rebellion began, with riot police threatening to storm the building, Atwater stepped down. In a Washington Post piece...he complained that the students had distorted his record on civil rights and failed to recognize the good he could do. Wrote Atwater: 'I had a lot to offer Howard.'

Atwater's appointment to the board was a marriage of convenience. The R.N.C. chairman wanted better ties with the black community, and Howard President James Cheek was eager to curry favor with the new Administration....Howard's students, however, were not so willing to go along. Atwater's appointment, declared an editorial in Hilltop, the campus newspaper, undermined 'the principles this school was founded on.'"

Perhaps Atwater thought his love for Black music would get him over, but it didn't. And all those years of destroying people for political gain, all on the backs of the children of slaves, caught up with him. He reportedly had his "coming to Jesus" moment before succumbing to a brain tumor, repented, and apologized to those he had harmed and defamed along the way. He died on March 29, 1991, his Bible still wrapped in its cellophane.

Atwater died a second time, on November 4, 2008, with the election of Barack Obama. And the Southern Strategy died with him. As the party known for little else than "starting wars and jacking votes," as comedian David Alan Grier recently noted, the G.O.P. could no longer depend on racism for their bread and butter. Try as the McCain-Palin ticket did to stoke the flames of racial anger and resentment by conjuring up the image of Obama as the uppity communist Muslim terrorist with a radical Black pastor, the Southern Strategy made its last stand in national politics. Obama carried nearly every demographic across race, age, gender and income, and his opponents soon learned that there was not enough racism in the country to carry them to victory. They soon learned that their time-tested strategy had become their albatross.

Now, the Republicans are relegated to the South — an extremist backwater party of white heterosexual Christian fundamentalism, cultural intolerance and political irrelevance. They embrace xenophobia, islamophobia and homophobia as America becomes a browner, more diverse nation. They uphold the plutocratic interests of free market capitalism at a time when the public demands greater government intervention in the economy, as a check against corporate excess and upward wealth redistribution.

But hold it, wait a minute: let's not lull ourselves into thinking that all is well, and that we have somehow [waved a magic wand](#) to bring us into a post-racial America. The election of the first Black president has sparked over [200 hate-related incidents](#), according to the Southern Poverty Law Center. And while the president-elect is African American, Black men are still the most marginalized, at-risk segment of the population. They are funneled into a cradle-to-prison pipeline, and while they are overrepresented among the clients of social service agencies, [rarely are they sought for leadership positions](#) in the nation's nonprofit organizations.


Nevertheless, recent developments are promising. Now is the time to look for leadership in new places, and from new faces. And while we're at it, perhaps we can reject the Atwaters of the world who seek to defile the political discourse, detract from the real issues and divide us from each other. Southern Strategy, rest in peace, and may we never see you again.


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The BlackCommentator Readers' Corner Blog

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