

## The Age of Reagan

# Selling the idea that government is bad, greed is good

When Ronald and Nancy Reagan moved into the White House in 1981, GROW felt the chill winds of change. They feared the loss of their VISTA staff, which had helped power their work during the Carter years. As grassroots organizers, they tried to tamp down a creeping dread, and braced for what was to come.

They were right to worry. The conservative agenda that Americans were fed for the eight years of the Reagan Administration kept GROW running from one crisis to the next, from fighting crippling cuts to social programs at home to protesting escalating US intervention in Central America.

The presidential campaign had been brutal, and the Republicans' slash-and-burn tactics bought them a landslide. They took it as a mandate and an excuse to avoid negotiation or collaboration across the aisle. The Reagan Administration quickly set about smashing unions, deregulating industries, beefing up defense spending, launching the War on Drugs, spreading fear of AIDS, cutting taxes for the country's richest, slashing funding to serve the poor and mentally ill, and reshaping the Republican Party into what would emerge as the modern conservative movement.

At its core, the message was the line Reagan used to great effect on the campaign trail: Government is not a solution to our problems; government *is* the problem. But while popular narrative today credits the president with reducing the size of government, in reality he increased spending and turned the United States from a creditor to a debtor nation. That brand of doublespeak was the

handiwork of a growing industry of conservative lobbyists and think tanks whose job was to formulate, package, and sell a national agenda that elevated corporate control, choked the middle class, and left the most vulnerable Americans to fend for themselves.

While campaigning, Reagan promised voters that he would cut welfare, telling a well-worn story of a Chicago mother with "80 names, 30 addresses, 12 Social Security cards, and is collecting veterans' benefits on four non-existing deceased husbands. She's got Medicaid, getting food stamps, and she is collecting welfare under each of her names. Her tax-free cash income alone is over \$150,000."

Problem was, when reporters went looking for this "welfare queen" they discovered she didn't exist; she was manufactured. No matter, by then the damage was done, and the idea of welfare cheats took root in the country's imagination.

The promise to roll back welfare was Reagan pandering to a base that was being groomed to believe that their tax dollars were being given willy nilly to grifters and

free-loaders, not to families unable to make ends meet in a country as rich as the United States.

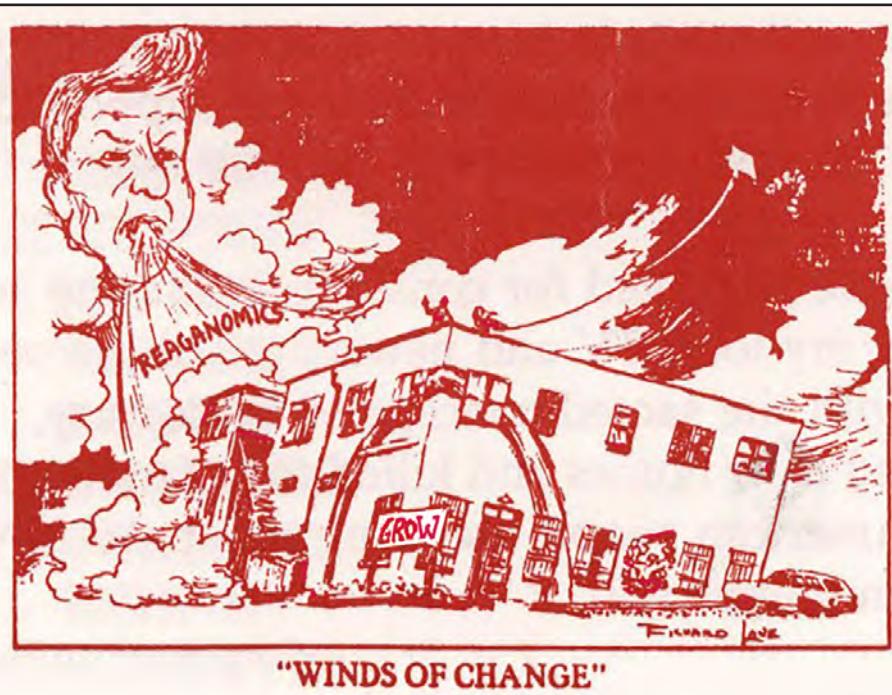
The hard-fought gains of the civil rights movement were still fresh, and racism still lingered in the hearts and minds of many Americans, including at the highest levels of government. In 2019, Tim Naftali, former director of the Nixon Presidential Library, reported in *The Atlantic* about a conversation that had recently come to light between Reagan and Richard Nixon that the latter taped in the fall of 1971. The candid chat was released in 2000, but because of its explosive content was withheld to protect Reagan's privacy. Nearly two decades later, the tapes were made public.

California Gov. Reagan called Nixon to vent about a recent United Nations vote against the United States. "Last night," he told the president, "I tell you, to watch that thing on television as I did, to see those... monkeys from those African countries — damn them, they're still uncomfortable wearing shoes!"

The president laughed, commiserated, and then made several calls to his allies, which he also taped, recounting Reagan's outrage. Nixon's version of the story called the delegates from Africa "cannibals."

### The GOP gets a makeover, and it ain't pretty

While political candidates have always spun and inflated their abilities, the new messaging conservatives were constructing in the 1980s consistently appealed to humans' worst instincts, and turned gas-lighting into an art form.



State Media Co.



President Ronald Reagan endorses Carroll Campbell (left) for governor at the Carolina Coliseum Coliseum in Columbia on July 24, 1986. Sen. Strom Thurmond is on the far far right.

The source of much of the new nasty came out of South Carolina. It began with Columbia native Harry Dent, who constructed what became known as the Southern Strategy, updating the GOP's playbook for an evolving electorate by using coded language to appeal to a base of voters clinging to old ideas and beliefs.

"In South Carolina, there are essentially three demographics: traditionalist whites, poor Blacks, and New Southerners, the latter of which is middle- to upper-income, educated and racially mixed. For the purposes of the primary, the second group is of little consequence," wrote Jason Vest in 1995 in *POINT*, which was published out of the GROW offices.

Vest said, "The New Southerners are a vaguely enlightened strain of libertarian conservatives, the architects and beneficiaries of a successful decade-old state economic policy rooted in foreign trade and investment. The traditionalists (or, more specifically, conservative Christians), however, are another story, and the battle has been for their votes."

Mapping and mining this social strata is central to the Southern Strategy, which is credited with securing Nixon's election. In appreciation, the new president appointed Dent special counsel, a position he held for four years.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, another South Carolinian took the Southern Strategy and put it on steroids. Lee Atwater, the

celebrated bad boy of the GOP at home and in DC, turned the rigged game that is American politics into a bloodsport.

"Atwater's tactics were a bridge between the old Republican Party of the Nixon era, when dirty tricks were considered a scandal, and the new Republican Party of Donald

Trump, in which lies, racial fear mongering, and winning at any cost have become normalized," Jane Mayer wrote in *The New Yorker* in 2021.

Atwater worked in the Reagan White House, managed George H. Bush's presidential campaign, and had cultivated such powerful connections within the party that by age 37 he was head of the Republican National Committee.

At home, Atwater was the key strategist for top Republicans, including Carroll Campbell. The Greenville native who served in the SC House (1970–1974) and Senate (1976–1978) was no stranger to racial politics. Early in his career, Campbell fought integration of South Carolina's public schools, once leading a caravan of 800 cars to the State House to fight "forced busing," language straight out of the new Republican Party playbook.

The issue was so hot that it provoked a mob of white parents armed with ax handles, bricks, and chains to overturn two buses that had taken Black students to schools in Darlington County. On March 3, 1970, some 200 men and women fought with nearly as many cops for half an hour. News accounts reported that police were barely able to rescue the children before vio-

lence broke out. Of the 40 people charged after the riot, just three were sentenced to jail.

With Atwater's help, in 1978 Campbell was elected to the US House, becoming the first Republican since Reconstruction to represent the 4th Congressional district. He beat Democrat Max Heller, a two-term Greenville mayor.

Controversy surfaced after it was reported that Campbell's campaign had conducted polling to determine voters' reaction to learning that Heller was "(1) a Jew; (2) a foreign-born Jew; and (3) a foreign-born Jew who did not believe in Jesus Christ as the savior." After the poll, an independent candidate with ties to the Atwater spin machine entered the race and made Heller's religion a point of his campaign. While these tactics failed the smell test, they didn't stop Campbell from getting elected then, and again, for governor, in 1987.

### Boogie Man

Bursey remembers having a beer with Atwater at a bar in Columbia. "I didn't agree with him on practically anything," he said, "but you should respect well-honed skills of your opposition, and Lee was the sharpest knife in their drawer."

Just three years apart in age, Atwater was Bursey's contemporary. Polar opposites politically, they nonetheless had a lot in



Lee Atwater (right) with Washington colleagues Paul Manafort and Roger Stone in 1989. Ronald Reagan used their firm — Black, Manafort & Stone — during his run for president in 1980. Donald Trump was the firm's first client.

The firm lobbied Congress for various "governments" overseas, including dictators Ferdinand Marcos of the Philippines, Mobutu Sese Seko of Zaire, and Angola's Jonas Savimbi, for which it received \$3.3 million in the early 1990s, according to the Center for Public Integrity.



## Ronnie Gets His Guns

common: both driven, extreme, and gifted with an uncommon confidence. They were smarter than most, schooled in the peculiar vagaries and personalities at the helm in South Carolina, and clear about the way the game is played in the Palmetto State.

Atwater's record was unmatched, but for him it was just a game. "I've always thought running for office is a bunch of bullshit," he wrote in an unpublished memoir. "Being in office is even more bullshit. I'm proud of the fact that I understand how much BS it is."

The memoir was never published because Atwater died before he could finish it. At 39, he was diagnosed with a brain tumor. Aggressive treatment didn't buy him the time he hoped it would, and he died a year later.

The unfinished manuscript was picked up — and apart — by John Brady, who would spend four years writing *Bad Boy: The Life And Politics Of Lee Atwater*, published in 1996. The book documented a lot the public already knew about Atwater: his singular and savage political skills, his meteoric rise to power and influence over party politics, his idea to position the South Carolina presidential primaries between Iowa and New Hampshire, boosting the state's political clout. People also knew about his love of blues music that had him socializing in circles seemingly at odds

with his seamy political associations. The handler who pedaled racial politics recorded with B.B. King, was friends with James Brown, and was given a guitar by Rolling Stones band mate Ron Wood.

The book revealed a lot the public didn't know, as well, including the family secret that profoundly shaped young Lee. At age 5, he was in the kitchen when his toddler brother climbed onto a basket next to the stove and pulled a pot of boiling oil on top of himself. The boy died at the hospital later that day. Atwater wrote that his brother's screams haunted him his whole life. The family buried their youngest, and with him any mention of the child's name.

Perhaps that tragedy contributed to his drive to think big, take risks, and live with a certain urgency. He showed an early taste and aptitude for dirty politics. In high school, he promoted a friend for student body president — against the friend's wishes. Atwater papered the halls at school with posters advertising the candidate's platform of "Free Beer on Tap in the Cafeteria—Free Dates—Free Girls," circulated a list of the candidate's fake accomplishments, and devised a ranking system that put his friend in the lead. He then deployed bullies to intimidate "hippies" and others likely to vote for the opposition.

Atwater wrote that on the outside he was condemning the threats of violence, but privately was pleased that he could manipulate an upset victory, which the school later voided on a technicality. "I

learned a lot," he wrote. "I learned how to organize, and I learned how to polarize."

He sharpened the tactics he tested in high school into a buzz saw of political opportunism that carved his dizzying ascent to the top. He lived fast and hard, taking no prisoners and harboring no regrets. Until later, that is.

Much has been made of Atwater's religious conversion and change of heart after battling a brain tumor. In a piece that ran in *Life* magazine a month before he died, Atwater wrote, "My illness helped me to see that what was missing in society is what was missing in me: A little heart. A lot of brotherhood. I acquired more wealth, power, and prestige than most. But you can acquire all you want and still feel empty. It took a deadly illness to put me eye to eye with that truth, but it is a truth that the country, caught up in its ruthless ambitions and moral decay, can learn on my dime. I don't know who will lead us, but they must be made to speak to this spiritual vacuum at the heart of American society, this tumor of the soul."



*GROW was part of a national effort to challenge foreign policy by mobilizing the grassroots with a united plan of action should the United States escalate its military involvement in Central America.*

Not everyone bought it. His old partner Roger Stone was among the skeptics, telling *The New Yorker*, "Lee was a great storyteller but, in the end, he was just grasping at straws. The Atwater family disagrees and has no doubt that he became a Christian. But at that point he was also Buddhist, Hindu, and everything else."

Stone, who would be convicted in 2019 for lying, witness tampering, and obstruction of justice, considered Atwater an opportunist. "We both knew he believed in nothing. Above all, he was incredibly competitive. But I had the feeling that he sold his soul to the devil, and the devil took it."

Stone should know; he was pardoned by former President Donald Trump.

Author Brady also has doubts about the sincerity of Atwater's contrition. Among the material the family allowed the biographer to access were hundreds of cassette tapes, which Atwater used to keep notes when he could no longer write. Also recorded on those tapes were his prayers to God, which Brady said were all variations of, "If you spare my life, I will be the best foot soldier you have ever had."

Atwater was wheeling and dealing to the very end, Brady said, bargaining with the Almighty. The last visitors Atwater had before he died in Washington, DC, on March 29, 1991, were Ronald and Nancy Reagan.

## VISTA gets the ax

Among the social programs that President Reagan gutted was VISTA — Volunteers In Service To America — an anti-poverty program launched in 1964 as a domestic version of the Peace Corps. Volunteers served in communities across the country, offering educational and vocational training in low-income and under-served communities. It was a perfect fit for GROW.

"When President Jimmy Carter was in office," Bursey said, "he recruited antiwar Vietnam vets to run VISTA, and appointed former SNCC organizer and future US Congressman John Lewis its national director. The order of the day was not to treat the symptoms of capitalism, but to build a movement to root out the causes."

"One evening in late 1977," Bursey said, "a long-haired, wild-eyed 'Nam vet stopped by GROW and said he wanted to give us money. It was Dan Carney,

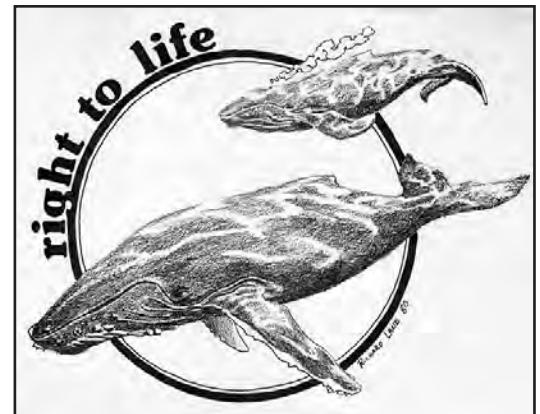
the state director of VISTA, who said he could give us 10 slots that would pay volunteers a minimum wage for a year of service. I got to pick the people and their projects.”

Within a few months, GROW was supporting 14 full-time staff. Some of the crew were organizing food co-ops, a few worked in the GROW office, and everyone pitched in at the Cafe downstairs. To keep costs down, some shared housing and depended on the company car.

It was, of course, too good to last. GROW lost its VISTA workers in 1981.

"The staff was devastated the night Reagan was elected president," Bursey said. "We knew we were going to lose our VISTA sponsorship and that our work just got much harder."

Upon Reagan's re-election in 1984, *GROW Notes* gave its readers a pep talk. Under the headline "Four More Years. Don't Mourn; Organize," it offered this message to the deflated troops: "The next four years will be a challenge, but we are united and we will not be defeated. We cannot afford to become cynical and burned out. We cannot afford to become victims to government harassment or dictated by right-wing dog-



ma. We must resist the ideology of racism, sexism, anti-gay bigotry, red baiting and union busting. We must not let the movement for peace and justice be replaced with the movement for war and oppression.”

The newsletter pointed to troubles in the United States and around the world, from South Africa and the Philippines to Central America, and told readers to take comfort from the resistance rising in those countries at the same time.

"It is encouraging to see our brothers and sisters resisting the hands of imperialism and corporate control. We as a people who feel a deep commitment to build a better world cannot ignore what is happening around us. The time has come when the survival of the planet is at stake. You have to take a stand. Are you on the side of the

people, or are you on the side of the privileged few?"

## The World According to Ronald Reagan



*Graphic from December 1984 issue of GROW Notes.*

The staff at GROW and their allies soldiered on in spite of the odds that were being stacked ever higher against them. If anything, the country's dramatic shift to the right only stoked their fears that gave their organizing work new urgency and purpose. ☀