

King of the College Republicans

One of the stupidest things I've ever done, I did as a College Republican.

My association with the CRs started in the fall of 1969, when as a freshman at the University of Utah I joined the organization. By then I was already enthralled with politics and unbeknownst to me was quietly making a name for myself. The previous year I had taken my first real role in politics—as a volunteer in the reelection campaign of Senator Wallace F. Bennett. And I had loved it. Tom Korologos, Bennett's chief of staff, took me on as part of a broader strategy to draw young people to the GOP senator's campaign at a time when college students across the country were flocking to anti-Vietnam War Democrats. I threw myself into the job, I had a blast, and got noticed.

The spring after joining the CRs, I got a call from Morton Blackwell, the executive director of the College Republican National Committee (CRNC). He was looking for competent students to help organize campuses in critical U.S. Senate races in 1970, and he had heard about my work on the Bennett campaign. I flew to Chicago, endured a brutal interview that felt more like a prison interrogation, and landed the job. I was to organize college students for the campaign of Senator Ralph Smith, appointed to the seat left vacant by the death of GOP Senate Leader Everett Dirksen. I trundled off to Illinois after the spring semester.

What brought out my stupidity was a remarkably attractive young co-ed who volunteered as a receptionist at the Smith campaign's headquarters in downtown Chicago.

Her parents were nominally active Democrats and one day she brought to work a fancy invitation they had received to the opening of the campaign headquarters of Alan J. Dixon, the Democrat running for state treasurer. To impress her, I led a few young Turks in preparing a faux invitation to the Dixon event with a summons that read "Free Beer, Free Food, Girls, and A Good Time for Nothing" in bold letters. We listed the date and time of the real opening of the Dixon headquarters and then handed out the fake invitation to vagrants, homeless, and drifters in bad parts of downtown Chicago and at a free rock concert in Grant Park.

The hungry and dispossessed were thrilled to receive such an invitation. The Dixon headquarters was swamped at its grand opening. Elite Democrats were horrified to see a virtual army of what Dixon later described as "derelicts and hippies, some with bed rolls." It was near bedlam. Thirsty vagrants came close to rioting, while the more well-to-do attendees were unsure of what to make of it all. The press lapped it up. But Dixon flipped it to his advantage by declaring that the crowd showed "the Democratic Party is the people's party . . . the party of everyone."

Back at the Smith headquarters all heck broke loose when the flyer became public. When one of the Smith campaign muckety-mucks said whoever did this would never work in politics again, my superiors told me to make myself scarce in far-flung corners of the state. I regret the prank. It was not only foolish and childish, it was unhelpful. Dixon won his race and the prank didn't even raise me in the eyes of the attractive receptionist at Smith headquarters. Over two decades later, when President George H. W. Bush nominated me to serve on the Board for International Broadcasting, Alan J. Dixon was then the junior U.S. senator from Illinois. The post was subject to Senate confirmation. If Dixon wanted to make a stink, he could have killed my nomination. It could have been payback time, but Dixon displayed more grace than I had shown and kindly excused the youthful prank.

I learned four vital lessons from Smith's unsuccessful campaign—beyond the dangers of acting stupidly. The first was that not everybody votes. On average over the past sixty years, 58 percent of eligible voters

have turned out for presidential elections and just 42 percent in off-year contests. This means that there is usually a large pool of possible voters on the table who can tip an election, if only they can be enticed to go to the polls. Smart campaigns focus on building the organization necessary to expand the pool of their voters. In my experience, organization can make a 2- to 4-point difference.

The second thing I learned was that a good “brand” matters a lot in politics. Smith was an able state legislator and a competent, long-serving Speaker of the Illinois House, but few people knew him outside his district. The campaign tried to expand the power of his name by resurrecting his middle name—Tyler—after realizing he was related to the tenth president of the United States, John Tyler.

But he was running against Adlai Stevenson III, great-grandson of a vice president, grandson of an Illinois secretary of state, son of an Illinois governor and two-time presidential candidate, and a state treasurer himself. Voters thought they knew a lot about Adlai Stevenson III from the reputation of his father and family and voted for him based on that assumption. It was a lesson I would recall as I worked with candidates whose families were well known. George W. Bush would be the most prominent of these, but neither the first nor the only one.

Third, I came to understand there are years in which one party has a structural advantage. In 1966, conflict over the Vietnam War divided Democrats and caused many swing voters to cast ballots for Republicans. In 1970, with a Republican in the White House, the war was cutting against the GOP.

Finally, I realized how bitter defeat tasted regardless of why my candidate lost. I didn't feel particularly strongly about Ralph Smith. I grew to like him (sort of), but I hated to lose. Tennis great Jimmy Connors, one of the most competitive athletes of his generation, once said that he hated losing more than he enjoyed winning. I know what Connors was getting at.

I grappled with this loss while back at school after missing nearly two months of classes to finish the campaign. I didn't know it yet, but a drama was playing out inside the CRNC that would have a big impact on my life.

The chairman of the CRs had stepped down after the 1970 elections and set off a chain reaction of events. The CRs' vice chairman, Joe Abate,

a law school graduate who was studying for the New Jersey bar, automatically became the new chairman and was intent on winning the post in his own right for a full term. The College Republicans were just getting over being divided between two camps: the Eastern, moderate Rockefellerites and the dominant Goldwater conservatives of the South and West.

To consolidate his position, Abate cut a deal with his principal opponent, George Gorton of California. Gorton agreed to deliver votes for Abate in June if Abate would immediately appoint a close friend of Gorton's to be the CRs' executive director. It was a deft political maneuver and well above what I as a lowly college sophomore could see.

It turned out that the new executive director, while intellectually bright, was a wholly inadequate manager. But a sloppily run national office could hurt Abate's election chances. In the era before the Internet, fax machines, FedEx, or even cheap long distance, someone needed to be in the CR office to make certain that mailings went out, correspondence was answered, and other things got done.

I was asked if I could fly standby to Washington, D.C., on a regular basis, work long hours for three or four days, and sleep on a mat on the floor of the apartment of the current executive director. And, oh, by the way, the executive director would probably take umbrage at my presence and I wouldn't get paid.

How could I pass up an offer like that?

I didn't, and shortly after winning his election in June 1971, Joe offered me the job of executive director.

The College Republicans were then housed at the Republican National Committee headquarters at 310 First Street, southeast of the Capitol. Befitting our status, the CRs were in the subbasement, under the parking garage and next to the print shop. You couldn't get lower than that. The staff consisted of a secretary and me and as many interns and volunteers as we could stuff into our workspace.

It wasn't glamorous, but there was lots of energy and a sense of mission. There was also a slightly subversive atmosphere. Our peers were in rebellion against bourgeois culture and, often, America itself. We were in rebellion against them and their campus dominance. And we got away with things that other people in the building couldn't, such as printing up a bright orange poster with a drawing of two dancing elephants with "Get It On! Join the College Republicans!" printed on it. We cribbed the

drawing from a German artist's pornographic sketches done during the Weimar Republic. Most of his work consisted of animals in obscene situations. The dancing elephants were one of his tamest works. The posters were a hit, both on campus and in the offices and headquarters of amused party leaders and candidates. We went through dozens of printings.

By and large, however, we were viewed with wariness by our superiors on the building's fourth floor—including the chairman, Senator Bob Dole. Our bitter infighting had soured many in the RNC on the CRs. Shortly after my arrival, I was summoned for a direct and brusque lecture by Senator Dole. His message was this: We're glad to have you—but don't make trouble. He did, however, do me one huge favor. After our conversation, Dole directed me to the office of Anne Armstrong, the RNC's co-chairman. We would report to her and were not to bother him. I will always be grateful for this crisp order: it led to a lifelong friendship.

Anne was a Phi Beta Kappa graduate of Vassar College who married an outgoing rancher named Tobin Armstrong and moved in 1950 from her home in New Orleans to a ranch in the middle of Kenedy County, Texas. The county is six times the size of the five boroughs of New York City put together, and when Anne arrived it had exactly 632 residents. Today it has a more manageable 402.

Anne and Tobin became active in the Texas GOP when its membership could, as they say, meet in a phone booth. Republicans had last elected a statewide officeholder in 1869. There was not a single Republican in the Texas legislature and only a handful of Republican officeholders in small rural courthouses in the historically Republican (and German) Hill Country northwest of San Antonio and in an occasional cow county at the tip of the Texas Panhandle, where enough Kansans had drifted south to make a difference. Texas was a Democratic state because it had been a Confederate state. Its Democratic roots were also deepened by the attention President Franklin Delano Roosevelt had lavished on Texas and by the ascent of LBJ and other Texans to national power.

Not that this deterred Anne and Tobin. They threw themselves into politics and rose up the ranks. Tobin became a widely respected party leader with a statewide network among ranchers. At a time when women in politics were expected to make coffee, Anne became a powerful figure. First as vice chairman of the Texas Republican Party and then as national committeewoman, she played vital leadership roles in the election in

1961 of John Tower as the first Republican senator from Texas since Reconstruction, and in the presidential campaigns of Nixon in '60, Goldwater in '64, and Nixon again in '68. As Nixon geared up for reelection in '72, he installed Anne as RNC co-chairman. That day in 1971 she laid down the rules: No funny business, stay inside your budget, expect to get regular assignments and complete them, tell us what you plan to do before you do it, and report in regularly. Then she flashed an incredible smile. This is going to be fun, I thought.

My job as executive director was to help state College Republican organizations and individual chapters expand the GOP's voting and volunteer base on campus. I wanted to avoid being caught in the long-existing rivalry between the Rockefeller moderates and Goldwater conservatives. While Joe was a conservative (as was I), we decided that all CRs would be treated equally. Our great contribution was to expand the "Student Fieldman Schools" (as in a field man for a political operation). We would take our Fieldman Schools program to college campuses on weekends and teach young Republicans how to organize. We covered campus recruitment, student canvassing, communication, and straw polls. We dealt with rudimentary campaign strategy, messaging, planning, fund-raising, scheduling fieldwork, and press work. Each of the participants received a massive notebook of "how-to" materials and the sacred texts of CR organizers, such as Saul Alinsky's *Rules for Radicals*, Tony Schwartz's *The Responsive Chord*, David Ogilvy's *Confessions of an Advertising Man*, and Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*. These and other books contained nuggets about how to organize and win political campaigns. Alinsky's slim volume was especially helpful in showing how our political adversaries thought.

One advantage of having to fly across the country and spend three days on your feet is that you end up meeting some of the smartest people in politics and making them your lifelong friends.

Another advantage is getting to meet local Republican leaders and candidates and soak in a state's political scene. My Rolodex grew and so did my understanding of the patchwork nature of American politics. Starting in 1971, I was to lead over 150 Fieldman Schools over the next six years with more than five thousand participants.

These schools churned out young GOP activists by the score. And their mission had a special urgency: the Twenty-sixth Amendment, adopted in July 1971, lowered the age to vote to eighteen from twenty-one.

Because of student opposition to the Vietnam War, conventional wisdom was that younger voters were solidly in the Democratic camp. GOP leaders were concerned about making sure Republicans were not drowned in the 1972 presidential election by a tidal wave of first-time young voters.

But something else was a little more pressing than the election—the draft. I had to continue working on my bachelor’s degree or lose my student deferment. I applied and was accepted to the University of Maryland for the fall of 1971. But even though I showed up on the Maryland campus, the paperwork to my draft board in Salt Lake from U.M. didn’t. Partway through the semester, I was notified that I had lost my deferment. My draft number was 84 out of 365. I was then placed at the front of the line to be drafted during the first four months of 1972 and there was nothing I could say to my draft board that would change that.

My first reaction was to feel that it was unfair to lose my deferment over a paperwork glitch. Then I realized I was simply going through what many other young men had faced. Some 19 million men turned eighteen between 1964 and the end of the draft in 1973 and 1.86 million of them were inducted during the Vietnam War. Now I could be one of them. I thought about enlisting in hopes of applying for a military specialty that would keep me out of combat, but then I turned fatalistic. This was the way my country decided who would fight. I had supported the war (though not LBJ’s mismanagement of it); maybe this was how I was meant to serve. I prepared myself to be drafted, withdrew from the University of Maryland, and put my affairs in order. Then, on January 31, 1972, Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird announced no one would be called up in the first four months of 1972. I would not be drafted after all.

Thirty years later, my draft status was inserted in the 2004 presidential campaign by John Kerry. At an April rally in Pittsburgh he personally attacked Vice President Dick Cheney and me as people “who went out of their way to avoid their chance to serve when they had the chance.” Later that day, en route to another rally, Kerry admitted he didn’t know the details of my draft record but refused to apologize, saying “I’m just not going to be accused by any of these people of not being strong on defense, period.” His campaign returned to the attack in September, questioning my patriotism by issuing a release and unleashing three surrogates to carry its message, including former senator Max Cleland.

It was a real insight into John Kerry. He spoke without knowing the facts, and he sounded as if he were attacking as unpatriotic the 15.97 million men who received student deferments during the Vietnam War. And he was also making two terrible mistakes for a candidate: he let anger drive his decisions, and he concentrated his fire on an aide rather than on the other candidate. Any day Kerry spent attacking me was a day he wasted.

But of course back in 1972, we had a different election to win—one where Richard Nixon would eventually face off against Senator George McGovern, the most liberal and the most vociferous critic of the Vietnam War of all the Democratic candidates.

I was staying focused on increasing the membership of Republican campus chapters. There was tension between the RNC and Nixon's campaign, the Committee to Re-Elect the President, or CREEP (with all those former Disney employees at his disposal, you'd think the Nixon people would have had better brand sense). CREEP wanted to downplay the Republican label, especially when it came to students, so it set up a parallel Nixon student organization with a budget that dwarfed the CRs'.

We worked with it as well as we could and worked by ourselves when we had to. Somewhere along the way, I was interviewed by a young White House reporter from CBS named Dan Rather, who would emerge as a key figure in an important event almost thirty years later when he published a false report on President Bush that cost Rather his job. Looking back at the 1972 interview, though, I almost don't recognize his interview subject—an earnest, long-haired kid with sideburns and an artificially low voice sitting on the couch, telling Rather, "You can't get a thirty-five-year-old to teach the Republican party how to get the young people."

As the spring passed and summer came, work on the Republican National Convention in Miami consumed everyone at the RNC. And unbeknownst to me, there'd be a special reward for the CRs' grunt work at the convention. Tickets for Nixon's acceptance speech were hard to come by, but Miss Josephine Good, who had run every Republican National Convention since 1956, handed me forty-seven—more than the Kentucky delegate had gotten, she said. For a few days, my friend Jim Dyer and I were kings.

We divvied up the tickets, focusing on the CRs who had been gung-ho, and reserved the last four for ourselves and two volunteers, the attractive Colorado CR chairwoman and some nebbishy kid from a place I can't recall. On the night of Nixon's big speech, the four of us grabbed a cab to the Convention Center. But the cabbie drove out of the security zone, got lost, and found himself on Collins Avenue, which was swarming with tens of thousands of protesters. Some began rocking the taxi. The cabbie panicked, ordered us out, and high-tailed it to safety. At first, the thousands of angry, screaming antiwar hippies didn't impede our progress toward the Convention Center a few hundred yards away. As we got closer to the gate, however, they grew more aggressive and began spitting at us and pounding the pavement with long bamboo sticks while chanting "guilty, guilty, guilty."

There was tear gas in the air, fired in response to protesters who had thrown animal blood at those manning the barricades. It was too much for the nebbishy kid, who freaked out and froze up. Thinking fast, Ms. Chairwoman slapped him. Hard. Then she yelled, "Snap out of it! Get moving!" and began dragging him. It was a remarkable performance. With help from riot police and National Guardsmen who ventured out with bayoneted rifles to gather us up, we made it inside the sally port. A few minutes later, we took our seats in an arena filled with delegates, many of whom were coughing or suffering watery eyes from tear gas. It was a surreal way to arrive at President Nixon's opening speech.

The fall campaign was a blur of activity. The office worked virtually around the clock. I was on the road a lot for debates and training seminars. We joined in hammering McGovern for his far-left views on national security, the war, and spending while heralding Nixon's efforts to conclude the war honorably and open the door to China and better relations with the Soviet Union. The 1972 campaign's final weeks saw McGovern drawing huge crowds of enthusiastic antiwar supporters. But Nixon swept forty-nine states on Election Day, leaving Massachusetts and the District of Columbia for McGovern.

Even among the young, Nixon fared well. Exit polls showed the eighteen- to twenty-four-year-old vote went 50 percent for McGovern and 48 percent for Nixon. Students were slightly better for McGovern (52 percent to 46 percent for Nixon) while nonstudents split evenly,

49 percent to 49 percent. While McGovern ran 12.5 points better among the young than he did among all voters, the results showed a latent conservatism among young people.

At the 1973 inaugural, we celebrated Nixon's victory by hosting a giant block party for the CRs the night of January 20 at a run-down apartment building on Second Street, Northeast. CRs like me had come to occupy most of the eight units in the building and we'd opened our apartments to visitors to crash on couches and floors. Each floor had a big trash can with plastic bag liners filled with grain alcohol punch. I had a blast, even though I didn't drink. It wasn't because of any religious precept. I just didn't like the taste and getting buzzed made me feel uncomfortable.

I learned a lot in those intense two years at the CRNC. For one thing, I learned that politics worked. It was not a crapshoot, an irrational contest in which the results were decided by the best ad and the cleverest sound bite. Sure, elections are colored by the emotions and often cock-eyed philosophy of the voters. But within those constraints, it's a logical process in which voters—with imperfect information and differing amounts of attention—try to do the right thing. It is a process that can be understood, managed, and bent toward a preferred outcome by a campaign that knows what it wants to say and how, to whom, and when to say it.

I also learned that ordinary Americans tend to be conservative. Maybe not conservative in the mold of Adam Smith and Whittaker Chambers, or Barry Goldwater and Bill Buckley with a well thought out and coherent philosophical framework, but center-right in their mind-set and inclinations. The elite who run the media, dominate popular culture, captain the publishing houses, and fill out the ranks of America's writers are not. A perfect embodiment of this was Pauline Kael, then a film critic for the *New Yorker*, who complained after the 1972 election, "I don't know anyone who voted for Nixon." No, Nixon's 61 percent, 23-point victory didn't draw many voters on the Upper East or West Sides of Manhattan. But then, the people who live there don't reflect the views and attitudes of much of the rest of America.

Being a College Republican gave me and other political junkies a sense of efficacy. We could do this. We learned the power of mastering new technologies to communicate our message. We saw that politics was

not about power or status, but about ideas and ideals. To view it as about power was to treat it as a game, cynical and ultimately meaningless and cruel. But to understand that it was about great principles was to understand that politics could be a hopeful and important exercise at the center of our democratic experience. CRs connected me with the GOP's leadership, helped me realize I was good at this stuff, could do it as well as others much older than me, and gave me a sense that I could contribute.

With Joe Abate's term as national chairman ending in June, a surprising number of College Republicans thought I should succeed him. I decided I'd make a run for it—and that set off one of the lasting controversies that still swirl around me in some corners.

There were three groups vying to put their guy in the top CR spot in 1973. The first was Abate's inner circle, the CRs' "old guard." It was led by Bernie Robinson and dominated by midwesterners. This group had traditionally run College Republicans and one of its potential candidates was Bob Edgeworth of Michigan. The second was made up of conservative die-hards who had never reconciled themselves to Abate's "open-door" policy. This group was led by mostly D.C.-based College Republicans such as Terry Dolan (later the founder of the National Conservative Political Action Committee). This crowd was skilled in convention politics and, because of the generosity of Richard Viguerie, the right-wing direct mail company president, they were well funded.

The third group was everyone else, a motley crew that included mostly state chairmen who hadn't played an active role in CR national politics and weren't part of either clique. Many of these people supported me because they appreciated how I had run the Fieldman Schools and the CRNC operation as its executive director. But as numerous and enthusiastic as my well-meaning supporters were, I couldn't win with them alone. We'd be ground down by the superior resources and expert convention talents of the other groups. We needed to create a synthesis of the old guard and the disorganized new crowd.

Fortunately, Joe, Bernie, and a third old-guard figure, John Zemaitis, led an effort inside Abate's establishment to pull it behind me. It worked.

I soon had two campaigns going. One was focused on preparing a platform and building a team of supporters. The other—more undercover—involved trading favors. To get the establishment to back me, I was told I would have to pick a midwesterner as co-chairman and give another mid-

westerner the right of first refusal as executive director. These were prices worth paying; there wasn't any other way to meld the Abate establishment with the Rove ragamuffins.

I had to travel to meet the delegates and personally solicit their votes. This was not easy for me. I was fine at making a speech, but it was difficult to make small talk. If I wanted to win, I had to let the voters know me. One trip stands out. It started with an overnight train ride on March 19 and 20 from Washington, D.C., to Columbia, South Carolina, where I met the "godfather" of that state's College Republicans, a quintessential southern right-winger named John Carbaugh. He was later to be Senator Jesse Helms's foreign policy advisor. When I met him, though, he controlled the votes of the South Carolina Young Republicans and College Republicans.

Bernie had cut a deal with him for the support of the South Carolina CR chairman. It was simple: if I'd name the South Carolinian as my southern area campaign chairman and take him on a trip through the South, the state's vote was mine. It was an easy deal to make. The title was a nothing title. And while I hadn't met the South Carolina chairman, we'd become friends over the telephone for much of the past year. He struck me as smart and conservative in his politics but not in his approach to life. I thought it'd be fun to take a drive with this guy.

His name was Lee Atwater.

In a rented, ugly yellowish brown Ford Pinto, Lee and I spent six wild days driving through the South. Our first stop was in Atlanta, where Lee was smitten with the state CR chairwoman, Andi Poynter, a cute co-ed who promised to try to lock up her successor. In Gainesville, Florida, the state chairman let us crash at his apartment and promised to do what he could for me. The law student who controlled the Alabama vote couldn't meet us: he had an exam. His name was Jeff Sessions (now a U.S. senator) and he'd locked up the support of the incoming state chairman. On our way to meet the new chairman, we stopped for breakfast and Lee ordered cornflakes and then doused them in Tabasco sauce.

From there it was on to Mississippi, where we met with Roger Wicker and his buddy Lanny Griffith, who were being pressured by the state's GOP executive director (and now governor), Haley Barbour, not to vote for me. But after dinner with them, I knew they would stand firm.

Lee and I left Pontotoc, Mississippi, late and didn't notice that we

were low on fuel. So deep into the night of March 23, 1973, somewhere on Highway 78 in the Mississippi piney woods between New Albany and Byhalia, with Lee behind the wheel and the radio tuned (loud) to a Memphis R&B station, we ran out of gas—dead-plumb-rolling-to-a-complete-stop out of gas, with no town or service station in sight.

There were lights in the woods indicating some kind of house or structure. Lee confidently told me he'd check it out and told me to get behind the wheel. He disappeared into the gloom. About fifteen minutes later, he reappeared, running at a full gait, carrying a gas can. He slammed the gas into the tank, threw the can into the ditch, and himself into the passenger seat. "Go!" he yelled. He took over behind the wheel when we got to Memphis and drove into Arkansas, where we caught a few hours of sleep at a motel near the site of next day's state CR convention. He slept easily. I kept wondering where he got the gas and why he had been running.

Saturday, the Arkansas CR convention went well as we picked up that state's vote. Lee and I made a late-morning flight out of Little Rock to D.C., arriving about two and a half hours later and grabbing a cab to the Bellevue Hotel on Capitol Hill for a regional CR convention.

There were several hundred students attending the convention from colleges in the District of Columbia, Maryland, Virginia, West Virginia, and Kentucky. Its winner would pick up the two votes of the regional director and co-director, which would provide critical momentum as the spring CR state convention season got under way. Dolan was from the region, so he was looking for the gathering to give him a strong boost.

He fell short, in part because we were able to deploy Lee to win over delegates from the then all-women Radford College in southwestern Virginia. The Dolan guys thought of Radford as "their" school.

Lee, ever the ladies' man, was set loose to lobby the Radford girls. I, on the other hand, never the ladies' man, was hustled off to back-room meetings, mostly to thank supporters. I was hustled from room to room. While moving from one to another, I rounded a corner to find Lee—his fingertips intertwined, rocking back and forth on his heels, surrounded by a group of the Radford girls, all dressed in their colorful formals. Radford was in the middle of nowhere and the girls didn't get many excuses to pull out their finery. They were all laughing and holding drinks. Lee had a big grin on his face. He winked at

me. I got the message and moved on. Lee was fully in control of the situation.

The next day, the voting at first went as our opponents had forecast and Dolan was confident he'd win. That is, until Radford College was called for its vote. When its chairwoman stood and cast the delegation's votes for my side, the place went nuts. It was clear to everyone just who would prevail. I glanced at the back of the room: Dolan and his crowd were one angry bunch.

There were other battles to be fought that spring, but the Dolan candidacy had no chance. A few weeks before the CRs gathered in Lake of the Ozarks, Missouri, he quietly withdrew from the race. But that cleared the way for a curious convention fight. Bob Edgeworth, who had earlier promised not to run, broke his commitment and tossed his hat in the ring. We had an overwhelming majority of the vote, but we braced for what we were about to get—an old-fashioned convention fight.

People might think that at the convention I was the central figure, inspiring the troops, providing critical strategic insights, and directing operatives hither and yon to nail down every last vote. But these people would be wrong. In the days leading up to the convention, I was generally assigned the less glamorous job of picking up CRs at the airport or train station. Mostly I sat by myself and read or watched TV in the back room of our headquarters suite while my future was in the hands of others and the swirl of College Republican politics engulfed the little Ozark beach resort.

The convention opened Saturday morning with my name and Edgeworth's placed in nomination. As the roll call was being read, Edgeworth produced a bullhorn and began reading his own from the side of the room. His purpose was to dispute the outcome of the convention by having competing roll call votes. He knew he'd lose the official count, but wanted a reed, however thin, upon which to allege that he'd been cheated at the convention. It was almost comical. The final official tally was 54 for Rove, 25 for Edgeworth, and 2 dead-enders for Terry Dolan. Bob's Bullhorn Roll Call produced God-knows-what-margin and arrived at a different conclusion, to which little attention was paid.

The intrigue began almost immediately with a challenge by Edgeworth to the convention's outcome. He asked Republican National Committee chairman George H. W. Bush to seat him as the rightful College

Republican national chairman and sent a blizzard of paper to Bush's office at the Republican National Committee. Bush appointed a committee to investigate Edgeworth's claims. The group quickly discovered, by calling the Republican chairman in the contested states, that Edgeworth's votes were specious. Bush signaled he expected to wrap up the investigation quickly.

But early in the week of August 6, 1973, it became clear that the other side knew they were losing. They escalated the fight. Rich Evans, the CRNC vice chairman whose hopes to succeed Abate had been dashed, had recorded a Student Fieldman School session in Lexington, Kentucky, in August 1972. That was fairly common: many students who attended the sessions made recordings and everyone took voluminous notes. But Evans's tape made its way to the *Washington Post*. In the part of the tape provided the *Post*, Bernie Robinson and I were heard talking in a wrap-up session devoted to the dos and don'ts of politics. I described my embarrassing Dixon episode, and Bernie described going through a Democratic gubernatorial candidate's garbage in 1968 and finding evidence a major donor was making contributions to both the Republican and Democratic candidates. Bernie's injunction not to ape his exploits was in the transcript and tape; my similar injunction not to duplicate the stupid thing I'd done was not. The intention seemed clear: to make me too toxic of a figure to be made the new chairman of the CRs by making it appear that I taught dirty tricks. On Friday, August 10, the *Post* ran a story under the headline "GOP Probes Official as Teacher of 'Tricks.'" The controversy reached a new level and probably drew more attention than it should have because it was developing just as scandals around Nixon were heating up.

Bush immediately instructed the committee to look into these new charges. It was not difficult to collect evidence. A handful of Edgeworth supporters echoed the line that the schools were nothing more than "dirty tricks" seminars, but Bush's office received a flood of letters and testimonials from attendees, guest expert lecturers (some of whom were personally known to Bush or the investigating committee members), and candidates and party leaders who were grateful for the young operatives trained at the schools.

Chairman Bush and his committee spent the next three weeks reviewing the matter; on September 6, Bush sent Edgeworth and me a letter

announcing his decision. I had been duly elected at the CRNC convention and would be recognized immediately as chairman by the RNC.

I had pledged to the midwesterners to make one of their crowd the executive director, but their choice took a pass because of health problems and the midwesterners let me know the pick was now up to me. I asked Lee Atwater if he'd come to Washington as my executive director. I gave him his first job in Washington.

A few days later, Lee and I went to meet with RNC chairman George H. W. Bush in his office. I expected a quick visit. Instead the new chairman invited us in for a long talk. He touched on the controversy and asked what we were going to do to heal rifts. He seemed genuinely interested in what our plans for the CRs were and encouraged us to think big. He talked plainly about the challenges the party faced as the Nixon White House's difficulties grew and public confidence in the administration shrank. He was generous with his time and supportive of our efforts.

I was struck by the gentility, calm, and evident integrity of this lanky Texan. There were flashes of toughness, too. For example, he dismissed Edgeworth and some of his followers as irretrievably lost to rational persuasion.

As we stood to leave, Atwater nervously buttoned his jacket and, in a state of agitation that became obvious as he grew more intense, jugged his head forward and asked Chairman Bush, "Do you have a boat on the Potomac?" When the chairman responded that he did, Lee spat out, "Can I borrow it this weekend?" He had the look of anxious concern that came on whenever he was dealing with something really important. Lee went on to explain that a really attractive girl was coming up from South Carolina that weekend and his being able to take her out on the boat would really impress her. He allowed that he was familiar with boats, mentioning the specific kind the chairman had, and pledged to return it fully fueled. He'd done his homework. The request was unexpected, out of left field, edgy and chancy. It impressed Bush. With a laugh, he agreed and told Lee to get the keys from his office before leaving the building that afternoon. Lee would ultimately marry the girl.

A couple of weeks later, Bush's chief of staff, Tom Lias, called. The chairman wanted to know if I would be interested in working as his special assistant. I was blown away. I moved my office to the fourth floor, six floors above my old digs in the CR subbasement. It was October 1973.

My association with people named Bush had started, and it would last a whole lot longer than I could have imagined then.

It wasn't a glam job—but on Wednesday, November 21, 1973, the day before Thanksgiving, I was asked to meet the chairman's son in the lobby and give him the keys to the family car. When the call came after lunch, I slipped down to the lobby and waited. George W. Bush walked through the front door, exuding more charm and charisma than is allowed by law. He had on his Air National Guard flight jacket, jeans, and boots. I introduced myself and we chatted about nothing for a few minutes. I gave him the keys to the family car, a purple AMC Gremlin with a Levi Strauss interior. Say what you will about the senior Bush, he has never been car proud. His son, used to driving a red sports car around Harvard Yard, was not impressed. I did not see much of the younger Bush for several more years.

There was another fateful meeting I'd have after entering the Bush orbit—Val Wainright. An attractive, blond, chain-smoking intern and the daughter of one of Bush's most loyal volunteers, Val was from an old Houston family. She had a great personality, was cute as hell, and had a funny way of crinkling her eyes when she broke into a joyful big smile. I was smitten, though initially I thought I was playing way out of my league. It turned out that I wasn't. Great and wonderful things were to come from it—and pain, too. But for now, it was fun and not serious, a perk of youth.

In the meantime, there was my job and my duties as CR chairman. Within six months, Lee left to run Senator Strom Thurmond's intern operation. Fortunately, I convinced Kelly Sinclair, an able and affable Kentuckian, to take his job. Lee was supposed to overlap with him by two weeks to show him the ropes, but on the day Kelly arrived, Lee left at lunch and never returned. That was Lee: you took him on his terms or not at all. And while we were friends for a long time, we were never closer than the first week we traveled southern highways in the ugly Pinto. I am not certain how many really close friends he had, but loneliness may be the normal state of genius. And Lee was a genius at politics—at understanding people and what would move them.

As Bush's special assistant, I saw the country moving against the president. I was tasked with efforts to generate support for the beleaguered Nixon White House as it was becoming increasingly clear that Nixon and

key people around him had been involved in Watergate. It was dispiriting and unpleasant. I found it increasingly difficult to defend Nixon. Had he known about the break-in at the Democratic National Committee headquarters? Had he authorized or known about the hush payments and cover-up and deceptions? What good could have come from burglarizing the DNC? Nixon had been way ahead, the Democratic Party was in disarray, their candidate was on the way to an enormous defeat, so why?

I saw Chairman Bush, an enormously decent man, balance his loyalty to the president who appointed him with his love for the party he led. And as time went on, it became clearer that his loyalty—our loyalty—to Nixon was misplaced. My days began to take on a hellish quality as the latest event in the drama caused the once-fervent Nixon backers I talked to fall away—disenchanted, distressed, and angry at the president's betrayal of their trust. Out around the country, they knew this was to have an unhappy ending. I hoped for a miracle that would restore Nixon's credibility and pushed my growing doubts about the president into the far recesses of my conscience.

Then, on August 8, 1974, Nixon resigned. I was on an airplane, returning from a student conference in Europe with another CR, when the pilot came on the intercom to announce the gist of the president's televised address to the nation. The passengers applauded. I was shocked and sat in silence. The next day, I watched on a television in the chairman's office as Betty and Gerald Ford accompanied Pat and Dick Nixon to Marine One and the now former president waved to the South Lawn crowd before lifting off from the White House one last time. I saw West Wing staffers and Nixon's daughters and sons-in-law weeping. I remember feeling anger that he'd let this happen to my party and profound disappointment in someone I'd trusted and worked so hard for.

Less than a month later, President Ford announced the appointment of George H. W. Bush as envoy to the People's Republic of China. His successor, Mary Louise Smith, asked me to stay on as her assistant, and before long I was shipped out to help one of the many endangered Republicans as their prospects in the 1974 elections dimmed.

My assignment was to help Virginia Haven Smith in Nebraska's 3rd District. One of the country's most Republican districts, it was nonetheless an open seat and Mrs. Smith had what barely passed for a campaign.

Her manager lived in a little town in far northwest Nebraska, well away from any voters. Her headquarters was in Grand Island, at the other end of the district, and most days lacked someone in charge. She had no set schedule—she just decided each morning where she'd campaign that day. There was no plan for mail, phones, get-out-the-vote, or even what the television and radio messages should be. I plopped myself down in Grand Island and tried to put what I'd been teaching in Student Fieldman Schools to work.

We had one great advantage: the candidate. Long active in the Farm Bureau Auxiliary, she knew people all over the district. And she was knowledgeable about the federal budget, having read every one since the early 1950s. I called for reinforcements, putting one of the RNC secretaries to work as office manager and phone bank director. She'd never done it before.

With less than six weeks to go, we targeted voters, cranked up a phone canvass, organized a real schedule that put the candidate where we needed her, drafted mail pieces, bid out the work to local printer and mail shops, coordinated getting computer labels for the target households, fleshed out the TV and radio scripts, and put to work as many volunteers as we could find. NBC's Tom Brokaw showed up to cover the race on a day when we had nothing scheduled, so we quickly picked a small town where Mrs. Smith had friends, and then organized an impromptu "drop-by": supporters would spontaneously spring out of their shops and stores to greet their longtime friend in a display of prairie politics. It worked, leaving Brokaw with the impression this was one popular woman with a heck of a following. She won by 737 votes. In contrast, the GOP lost four Senate seats and forty-eight House seats.

The Virginia Smith race showed me that what I had been teaching at the Fieldman Schools actually worked. We had been saying that the most important decisions are about structuring the campaign. The candidate's authority should be limited: he or she is in charge of deciding what issues, strategy, and tactics will be employed, but not in charge of the campaign itself. Virginia Smith was trying to do both—and failing at both as a result.

Operating people need to have operating authority (as George W. Bush later put it, "authority and accountability need to be aligned"). To be successful, a campaign needs someone who has the final

say to do something—a shot caller. Even if some of those decisions turn out to be wrong, it's vital that they are made and that the campaign carries out its broader strategy. Ad hoc changes kill campaigns.

When it came to people, we taught in the Fieldman Schools that the gap between professionals and amateurs is not that large. Smart people like the RNC secretary could be dropped into an unfamiliar setting and, with some guidance and her own smarts, get the job done. And while our existing technology was crude, we used to say, “Machines should work so people can think”—a slogan we stole from IBM ads. It made us open to being on the technological cutting edge.

A good strategy, so we taught in Fieldman Schools, starts with understanding your strengths and weaknesses so you can match your strengths against your opponent's weaknesses. Smith knew where the waste and fat was in the budget and had testified to Congress about it; making that a strength highlighted her opponent's failure to frame himself as a fiscal conservative. Good strategy also focuses the efforts on voters who are really up for grabs. For Virginia Smith, we focused on precincts whose Republican percentage swung more widely from one election to another and, in those precincts, on women voters who might be more disposed to vote for another woman.

Choosing the right issues helped strengthen the Smith campaign for its last six weeks. We focused on those on which she was most passionate and credible. In politics, there are two-sided issues, such as abortion, which deeply divide people, and one-sided issues, such as deficits, which tend to draw most of them together. We picked one-sided issues that could draw more people into our candidate's pool while having crisp, clear answers to the two-sided issues for those concerned about them. It's better to be clear on two-sided issues than to equivocate; somebody will trust you if you do the former and nobody will trust you if you do the latter.

The Smith victory was a notch in my belt and thus I returned to the RNC to be rewarded with a new assignment: executive assistant to the co-chairman, a Virginia conservative named Dick Obenshain. There were also rewards on the personal front. Toward the end of 1975, Val and I decided that even though we were just twenty-four and had known each other less than two years, we were in love and wanted to get married. I

made the pilgrimage to Houston to ask her father's permission. Bill Wainright gave his blessing and I was accepted into Val's family.

We set the date for July of the next year, 1976. America's bicentennial would also mark the beginning of our marriage.

But 1975 also ended on a note of confusion, and then change. I received a call from Bill Royall, a former RNC field operative and at this time executive director of the Republican Party of Virginia. He wanted me to become the Virginia GOP's finance director. I told him I hadn't raised money before and besides, I was happy working for Obenshain. He told me Dick had suggested he call me. That floored me. I told Bill I'd think about it and get back to him in a few days. I thought to myself, What is up with my boss?

A few days later, Dick came up from Richmond for a couple of days. I found an open time on his schedule and went in to tell him about Bill's offer. He glanced up from the papers he'd been scanning and said he knew about it and thought I should take it. I was shattered. I thought about it for a day and then called Bill back and accepted.

The next Monday, Dick Obenshain announced his resignation as co-chairman of the Republican National Committee. A Reagan supporter, he felt President Ford deserved to have someone of his choice as co-chairman. Dick had been planning to go back to Richmond full-time and wanted me nearby in the event he ran for the U.S. Senate in 1978. He'd engineered the job offer but felt he couldn't bring me in on his secret. He was trusting Bill's persuasiveness and my instincts. So when 1976 came I was off to Richmond and, while I didn't know it yet, points farther west and south.