

Little Red Pawns

By T.A. Norman

“Dubya is a fucking war criminal!”, he shouted. He was a large bald man, his sweat ridden red face made a strange contrast to his tense white knuckles. I’ve always assumed he spent a little too much time at the open bar that afternoon. The room full of cops, firefighters, civil workers, and politicians quickly turned from facing the County Executive campaigning on the podium to the man sitting next me. The PBA members that were present seemed to look exceptionally infuriated. This wasn’t the best time or place for a politically motivated outburst. The scene being a Republican candidate's fundraiser. This was made worse as he interrupted the candidate’s speech mid sentence. I started to feel flustered myself, as the packed banquet hall’s eyes began to wander from the large man to what his company at the table looked like. I felt their eyes shift to me. I had been an intern for the Republican Party of New Jersey for a whole week before this man’s outburst. “But if OBAMA wins this election, we’re all going to hell!”, he belted out once more, before sitting back down next to me. The room started slowly clapping, the clapping got faster, the most surprising applause coming from the candidate herself. An absurd act, done by an absurd man, with an absurd response. It quickly dawned on me that this was not a room of people I wanted to spend any more time with than I had to. *The deputy sheriffs, the soldiers, the governors get paid. And the marshals and cops get the same.*

After the event I walked up to my supervisor. I asked, “James, who the hell was that? Why did he think he could just do that?”. He explained to me that the man was was one of the top donors for New Jersey Republicans in the last few years. James always thought he was involved in the mafia, but I didn’t buy it. Made-men don’t make a fool of themselves. I did not know it at the time, but I would spend nearly three years working for the Grand Old Party. Mostly working for campaign staffs and doing voter engagement research. I would eventually

become very good at my job. I wish I had known what I know now at the time. Hindsight is a cruel bitch. Though I can agree on many of the policies that are currently in the Republican agenda. I can say with some certainty that it would take a hell of a lot for me to ever vote Republican ever again.

In the first year working for the GOP, I realized that the absurd nature of my first week would be a reoccurring theme. Politics is a petty game with petty players. *Stay free from petty jealousies. Live by no man's code.* The inconsequential actions of those involved were consistently enraging. For example, I once spent sixty hours of my week videotaping and transcribing every word a Democratic candidate spoke during any public meeting or speech. The point being to catch him making inaccurate statements or saying something unbecoming of a political candidate. While I was taping this man, the democrats instructed one of their interns to stand directly in front of my camera. I would move to the front of the room. The other intern would move in front of the camera. So I would move again. If I had to guess he attempted to block my shot for about thirty hours that week. This back and forth would continue and remains what I believe was undisputedly the single greatest conflict of triviality in U.S. history.

Of course, the candidate made no mistakes nor did I yield any real results. Even at the state and local level, these men and women were vigilant in their caution while speaking, all while being agonizingly bland. Nearly all acted more alike a Mitt Romney in their caution rather than an Anthony Weiner. Due to my lack of entrapping results, I was then tasked to follow the Democratic candidate home every night for over a week on the off chance that he engaged in any immoral after work activities. Petty tasks like these were too commonplace. Typically, I yielded no results.

What would actually distance me from the party was not the absurd outbursts, dull days, or petty politics. It was the preposterous and outlandish claims that the politicians would make to their constituents. I have trouble calling them “claims” as they were in fact fragile lies. *Neither of them are to be what they claim.* Each person involved seemed to have their very own carefully weaved web of lies. However, none were as intricate and delicate as those webs weaved by the politicians themselves. On one hand they would promise jobs while the other hand signed away the very same.

A certain member of the U.S. House of Representatives instructed myself via his campaign manager to begin to gather a “campaign research, action, and victory strategies” on a few key neighboring municipalities within my own district. This meant myself and the team of interns I supervised were tasked with voter research and registration, persuading community leaders, volunteer recruitment, ranking community events for the candidate appearances, setting up those appearances, gathering risk factors for the candidate, finding key voter issues, creating demographic profiles, along with a slew of other more minute town statistics. *They’ve done a lot of research on it. But what it is, they’re still not sure.* The municipalities that were in contention with Democrats happened to be largely Korean and Latino based with a lower median income than the rest of the district. My candidate's Democratic opponent was a Korean-American. He was a Georgetown Law graduate, a self-starter who during his time in the private sector did well to give back to the community, and employed a surprising amount of members in his community. It was a particularly uphill battle for my candidate, even though he was an incumbent. At the time the greatest issues that voters in these municipalities cared about was first the economy. This was true across the district, state and country. Where these neighboring

municipalities differed from the rest of the district was the possible closing of the nearby public hospital and similarly the possible closure of three schools, which included a high school.

I watched many times as my Republican Representative assured crowds of his constituents that if he remained in office he would “fight night and day” to stop the closure of these public institutions. He went to those schools and took pictures with the honor students. He went to that hospital, met the patients, the doctors. He visited the maternity ward and took pictures with mothers. Finally, he made sure to take pictures specifically with Korean newborns. *To protect his white skin. To keep up his hate. So he never thinks straight.* With full confidence he would announce to those crowds that he place the youth, their education, and the medical health of the community above all else. He guaranteed that he would ensure that all Republicans under him (in the State Legislature) would do the very same. However, as the election drew closer, his opponent by all of our estimations was going to win these municipalities, while making headway in towns that we all once believed to be a lock. Something needed to change. At the very least to give our staff some breathing room.

It was about this time that our staff was instructed to begin digging into the Democratic contenders past. With heavy emphasis on his voting history. Our team dug around public records for what seemed like an endless amount of hours. We found nothing. We moved onto family history, early employment, calling people he knew in college, and research of that nature. Still nothing to give us an edge. While this was happening, the staffers kept directing us to his voter history. As if it appeared out of thin air, the voting record was found by the clerk in the candidate's hometown. Looking over it our campaign found that he had not voted in the previous

election from his home in our district. Instead, he voted in his hometown fifty miles away, far outside our district. That was all we needed. Our campaign could claim voter fraud.

With one phone call and a copy of what we had found, the media picked up the story. The first article was released the next day. Our campaign went on the attack. The information was out, even though our voter fraud accusation was rocky at best, the claim itself made enough waves. If voter fraud couldn't be proven, our campaign was quick to call him a carpetbagger. Simply using our district as an advance for his political career. Larger media outlets began to pick up the story. The official statement being, "[he] is lying about his residency in the Fifth District or he's acted illegally by committing voter fraud — or both." All of this, a convenient three weeks away from the election. Which is why I still believe that the staffers were just sitting on this information. I am also still unsure why they made a team of interns find it.

After a few more shots in the media. A few more community leaders switching to our side. A few more community appearances acting strictly on the offensive. It was practically game over. November 4th came and went. Our candidate kept his seat in the house. There was a victory gala, that brought out the nonsensical behavior that I had become (as much as I could) accustomed to. I distinctly remember thinking, "These people don't get out very much".

That following summer I had to bring my grandmother to her doctors. On the drive we passed a boarded up hospital that our upstanding Representative assured so many times was one of his top priorities. All I could do was shake my head. I watched my grandmother as she was taken to a room to see her doctor. I figured I had a bit of time and remembered I was so close to this amazing cheese-burger shop down the road. I hopped in my car. Bob Dylan was on the radio. I was there in under a minute. I was driving back to the doctors and realized I forgot a drink. So I

turned off the main road and stopped at a Seven-11. As I walked out deja vu hit me. I turned to my right. What I initially assumed was an abandoned factory was the same High School that just like the hospital was promised to stay open. *From the poverty shacks, he looks from the cracks to the tracks.*

I thought of the mothers and newborns. The honor students. The jobs lost in these closures. Our Representative was 0/3 in my book. Those people were simply a ploy for him to make his claim. *For the politician's gain. As he rises to fame.*

During the end of my junior year of college, I received a call offering me a job to work for the Republican National Committee. They said it was because I was in Pennsylvania for school (a battleground state) and that because I was proven to be 'effective'. They asked if I would be interested in running a couple of counties in Pennsylvania on behalf on the RNC. I promptly told them no. I did happen to give them the contact of an old roommate of mine. He had worked on the local level for the Republicans outside of Pittsburgh. They offered him the job to run a county and he took it. After Donald Trump won the election, he was offered a full time staffer job for a Senator. Undoubtedly, an amazing opportunity. Another friend of mine was talking about this with me, he turned to me and said, "You fucked up. Steve's set now." I didn't have a response at the time. However, now I can wholeheartedly say that I do not regret it in the slightest. I may have been effective but the experience affected me in ways I still cannot fully comprehend. Disdain, doubt, rage, only begin to describe my emotions when I think back to my time as an intern. The Democratic party, may honestly be no different. It would not surprise me in the slightest. Just knowing what I know now. I cannot rationalize voting for the GOP any time soon. In many respects I am conservative. I just have no respect for conservative politicians.

I now take solace in a few things. Primarily the lessons learned. Those who win in the game of politics are often the best liars. Even though I was a part of his awful machine. I take great comfort in one fact. New Jersey's 5th district ousted their incumbent representative this past election. Fuck you Scott Garrett.

*Carved next to his name*

*His epitaph plain:*

*Only a pawn in their game*