

Arrovederci

by the St. Louis Post-Dispatch

"The problem with Karl is that it's always about the next election; it's always about power; it's always about getting the money from the big boys so you can control the process. It's not about principle; it's not about issues - issues are used to gain and keep political power, not to advance the interests of this country."

So spoke Tom Pauken, a staunchly conservative Dallas lawyer who was a key figure in the Texas Republican Party in the early 1990s when political consultant Karl Rove was grooming George W. Bush, the managing partner of the Texas Rangers baseball team, to run for governor in 1994.

Pauken got crosswise, as they say in Texas, with Rove, who retaliated by cutting off the Texas GOP's access to the party's big campaign contributors.

"It was Karl turning the spigot off," Pauken told James Moore and Wayne Slater of the Dallas Morning News. "He could turn it on. He could turn it off. If you don't play ball, he's going to make life difficult. And that's the way it was."

These methods - shrewd, devious, ruthless and utterly focused - came to be called "rovian."

It started at the Tan-Tar-A Resort at the Lake of the Ozarks in 1973, when Rove threw enough confusion into the annual convention of College Republicans that George H.W. Bush, then chairman of the Republican National Committee, had to choose the winner. He chose Rove and later hired him as an assistant. In the performance of those duties in late 1973, Rove was asked by the future president to deliver a set of car keys to his son, who was home on vacation from Harvard Business School.

Of such accidental moments history is made. Now, 34 years after handing George W. Bush the keys; 13 years after making him governor of Texas and seven years after making him president of the United States, Karl Rove has announced that he will resign as deputy White House Chief of Staff and political director Aug. 31 "for the sake of my family." He will move to Ingram, pop. 1,740, in the Texas Hill Country, to write his memoirs and contemplate the view of the Guadalupe River.

Those who believe that that's all he will be doing are underestimating Karl Rove. The nation will elect a president in 15 months, along with 34 U.S. senators and 435 House members. Rove's political heroes are former President William McKinley and Mark Hanna, who was President McKinley's version of Karl Rove. They successfully realigned American politics in 1896, ushering in 36 years of Republican dominance (Democrat Woodrow Wilson was elected president in 1912 only because William H. Taft and Theodore Roosevelt split the GOP vote).

Rove's methods are suspect (Florida in 2000, Ohio in 2004) but the results were not. And though he blew the 2006 midterm election, when he didn't have a client in the race, he hasn't abandoned his vision of a permanent Republican majority. He made that clear in a Saturday interview with Paul Gigot, editor of The Wall Street Journal's editorial page, to whom he divulged his decision to resign. Rove said, "I don't want to be Pollyanish about it, but if we keep our nerve and represent big things, we'll win."

Perhaps so. But Lord Acton's admonition about the corrupting influence of power applies in spades to Rove. Rovean though his actions were, his fingerprints are all over the Bush administration's problems of the past two years - the Plame affair, for which he narrowly escaped indictment; the U.S. attorney firings, in which his private e-mails mysteriously disappeared from servers; the Jack Abramoff-Tom Delay lobbying scandals, in which Rove was revealed to have ducked out of the White House to meet Abramoff on street corners, and dozens more.

The excesses helped the Democrats take control of Congress last year, and Rove is squarely in the crosshairs of their oversight committees now. Bush is expected to continue to claim that his dealings with Rove are covered by executive privilege. The question ultimately may have to be settled by the courts, and the 2008 election will be long over before that happens.

Karl Rove knows that, and as Tom Pauken said, "with Karl, it's always about the next election." He's now his own client, and there is nothing he won't do to win.

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