

# KINGMAKERS



## CARVILLE, ROVE DISCUSS PRESIDENTS – PAST AND FUTURE

By Matt Ottinger



James Carville and Karl Rove built their careers by winning campaigns.

Carville, a Louisianan (that’s the official nickname for the state’s residents) to his core, has a long resume – highlighted by facilitating the emergence of Bill Clinton, once thought of as merely a second-tier presidential candidate from Arkansas. Carville and George Stephanopoulos are featured in “The War Room” – a documentary that illustrates how they parlayed then-Gov. Clinton’s charisma and

political acumen into electoral gold. Carville also guided underdog Robert Casey to the Pennsylvania governor’s mansion in 1986.

Rove is regarded by George W. Bush as “the architect” of his campaign to the White House in 2000, as well as his successful re-election bid in 2004. Rove is famous for his targeted strategy of “rallying the base” in modern elections. Yet his successes date back to his days as chairman of the College

Republican National Committee – and leading a first-of-its-kind effort to bring out the youth vote for Richard Nixon in 1972.

The duo will entertain the audience at the Indiana Chamber of Commerce’s 26th Annual Awards Dinner in Indianapolis on November 4. They each spoke with *BizVoice*<sup>®</sup> (in mid-July) about their experiences and offered thoughts on the 2016 presidential election.

## James Carville

*Carville and his wife, Republican strategist Mary Matalin, live in New Orleans, but he’s relaxing at his weekend getaway in Mississippi during our interview.*

**I notice your hometown in Louisiana is also named Carville. Did your family create the town? What’s the story behind that?**

“The story is that the name of the place was ‘Island,’ and in 1909 there was another ‘Island’ in Louisiana. So the post office wanted to change the postal designation. As it happened, my grandfather was the postmaster – as was his mother. So somebody in the postal service decided to call the post office ‘Carville.’ ”

**Interesting. So when did you initially get involved in politics, and what drew you to it?**

“I’ve always liked politics. It was very colorful growing up in Louisiana. My grandfather was on what we call the police jury – what you’d probably call the county commission in Indiana. My uncle was on the school board and my dad was always interested. I enjoyed the conversations and I identified with it well.”

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## Karl Rove

**You got involved in politics at a young age. In fact, I just saw a Dan Rather interview with you from the ’72 Nixon campaign when you were helping get out the youth vote as a College Republican. What intrigued you about politics and made you want to do this for a living?**

“(Regarding the video) Warn your attendees that I don’t have as much hair as I used to.

“I really have no idea (when I first developed an interest). I’ve just been interested in politics – and history and government – for as long as I can remember, despite the fact that I don’t come from a political family. My father and mother were not political, and we didn’t talk politics around the dinner table. Like a lot of people, I was inspired by a teacher I had in high school and a professor I had in college; ironically, both of whom were Democrats. And they both knew I was not. But they both encouraged me mightily in my interest in politics.”

**What made you favor the Republican side?**

“I grew up out West (Rove lived in Colorado, Nevada and Utah in his early years), where there’s a natural tendency (to be

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## Carville

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### What made you favor the Democrat perspective?

“Like for most people my age, I determined at a pretty early age that Democrats were right on civil rights. And now it’s broadened out to other issues.”

### “The War Room” is quite an enjoyable film for political enthusiasts. Before the campaign, Bill Clinton was certainly not a front runner for the nomination. What about him was appealing and made you want to join his team at that time?

“God, it was just so clear to me after talking to all the other candidates. And it was as clear to me at the time as it is to most people now that he was a once-in-a-generation talent and he had that type of charisma.”

### What was he like as a candidate and a boss?

“I was just talking about this yesterday. As a candidate, his ability to grasp things was phenomenal. Of course, in a presidential campaign, no one needs to motivate you, so unless it was debate prep, my interaction with him was a 12-minute phone call every morning. I didn’t travel on the road with him. But he was a very good guy to hang out with. Maybe sometimes you could tell if he was tired; he was a better night person than morning person. But everybody has their own idiosyncrasies.

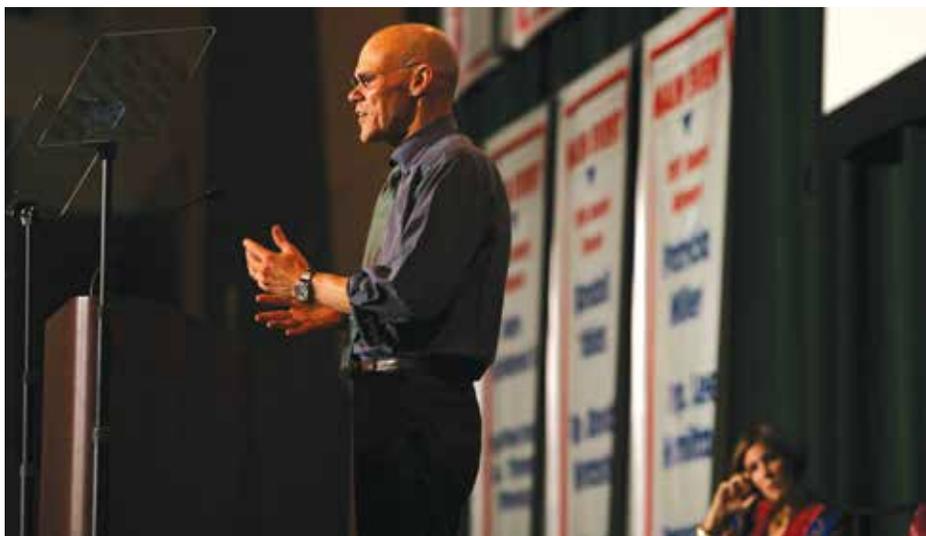
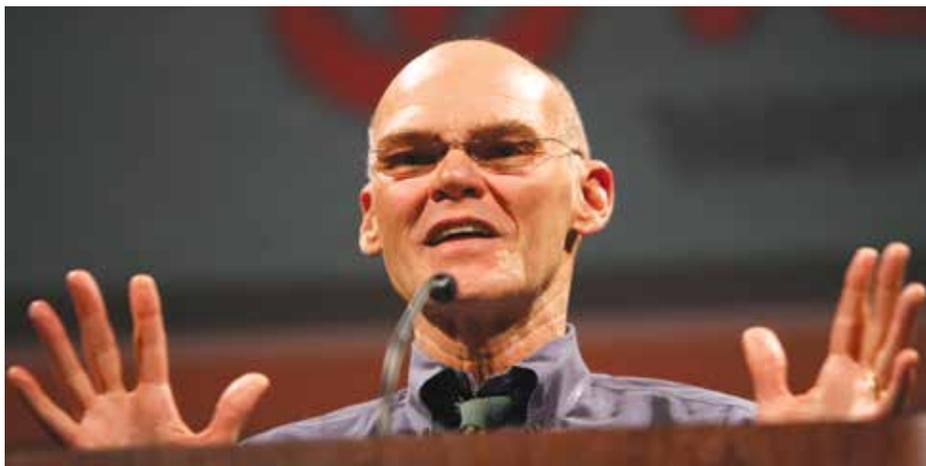
“He’s roughly the same age as I am, from the same part of the country, has the same politics. He once said he thought he and I were born in the same womb. We’d approach things from a similar vantage point and I’d never had an experience like that – someone so much on the same wavelength.”

### Speaking of the Clintons: Is Hillary a foregone conclusion to get the Democratic nomination? There’s a push from the left and Sen. Bernie Sanders seems to be gaining momentum. Does he or anyone else have a legitimate shot?

“I think (Clinton) will be the nominee. What’s undecided is what happens between now and then. How she gets it will be important too. These things never are as easy as people think they will be at the beginning. But remember, she came very close to getting the nomination in 2008. I won’t say ‘foregone conclusion,’ but it’s highly likely she’ll be the nominee.”

### What’s the most important message Democrats will need to communicate to voters in the general election?

“The great unfinished work in our



James Carville speaks to a packed house at the Indiana Chamber’s 17th Annual Awards Dinner in 2006. He and his wife, Mary Matalin, were the keynote speakers that year.

country is that we have not, for a period of time, matched the nation’s wealth with fair income growth for most people. We’re more productive, but the average working person continues to stay the same or fall behind.”

### You’ve spoken at our Awards Dinner before, and were accompanied by your better half (Matalin) in that instance. What is the secret to staying married to someone with such opposing political views?

“(Laughs.) When you think of all the problems married people have – in-law problems, money problems, health problems, problems from previous marriages – we’re blessed that the biggest issue we face is political differences. In the scheme of a marriage, I’d say political differences are low on the totem pole. And you can choose to have conversations about things other than

politics. That’s refreshing to me because I just got off the phone talking about politics, and now I’m talking to you about politics. Then I’m going to hang up and talk to someone else about politics. Then my wife will come out and I’ll talk to her; it would actually be nice to not talk about politics.”

### On her side of the aisle, who do you expect to emerge from the GOP primary? It’s such a wide open field now.

“I look at it this way – and in Indiana, one thing people understand is brackets – you have two brackets: the Jeb Bush/Marco Rubio bracket, and then you have the Scott Walker/Ted Cruz bracket. One will emerge from each of those, and they will play it off. I’m not perceptive enough to say who will win, but I think it will be clear fairly early who those two are.”

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conservative). The government is far away and personal responsibility and individualism and patriotism are all important. Even if you grow up like I did on the shabby side of the middle class, you believe that you can achieve whatever you want in life.”

**I read that the late Lee Atwater worked on your campaign when you ran for chairman of the College Republicans and that the two of you were friends. What did you learn from him about politics?**

“He had an incredible, intuitive sense for what people on the street were thinking. He had a lot of energy and he was precocious. We were 22 years old, I’d been elected college chairman and our office was in the sub-basement of the committee underneath the parking garage. We were summoned to the fourth floor to meet our boss for the first time, who was the chairman of the Republican National Committee. It was a tall lean Texas oilman named George H. W. Bush.

“We were a little intimidated and he gave us the fatherly lecture: Don’t mess up; spend your money wisely; do what we tell you to do; behave yourselves. Well, Atwater had a great sense of humor, and he could unintentionally be an unbelievably funny guy. Whenever he got nervous, he would start bobbing and weaving and stammering.”

(Rove describes their first encounter with Bush, impersonating Atwater’s stammer and South Carolina accent as the upstart operative made an unusual request.)

“Lee asked, ‘Mr. Chairman, is it true you have a boat on the Potomac?’

“Taken aback, Bush says, ‘Yeah.’

“Well, can I borrow it this weekend? I got this cute little girl comin’ up from South Carolina. It’d really impress her if I could take it out on the Potomac. I know that kind of boat, and I’ll return it full of gas.’

“There was just enough to it that Bush said, ‘OK,’ and lent him his boat for the weekend. As luck would have it, the young girl that came up was named Sally and he married her.”

**Did Atwater really put Tabasco sauce on his cornflakes?**

“Absolutely. I can’t think of cornflakes without thinking of Lee grabbing the Tabasco sauce. We were at a little diner in Alabama at six o’clock in the morning, and he grabs the Tabasco sauce. I’ll never forget it. He’d burned out his taste buds; it’s the only way he could taste anything.”

**I’ll ask this because you worked on part of the Nixon campaign. We had Woodward and Bernstein speak a couple of years ago at our Annual Awards Dinner. How do you think the Watergate saga would have been different if such an incident happened today?**

“Apparently, if you shred the hard drive and burn the tapes, you don’t get into trouble. My sense is this wouldn’t have happened in the modern age. This happened decades ago in a different era. I was looking at it from the outside, but at the heart of it, it was the burglary of the Democrat National Committee. My sense is that was just sort of a weird moment brought about by odd factors inside the campaign that I don’t think would be repeated today.

“It was insane at the time – and looks even more insane in the distance.”

**Shifting to now, there’s currently an enormous field of GOP candidates for president. Who would you say is most likely to get the nomination and why? Is there possibly still someone out there who hasn’t yet entered the race that could surprise people?**

“I doubt it’s the latter. We’re seven months in advance of the primaries. That’s a long time, but you need to be in and working hard now to have a shot at it. There will be too many allegiances and too much work and development done.

“We have a wide open contest. Everybody will have their moment with a good speech or debate or announcement, and the question is how much of that bump can they retain. Some have done a good job of it, like Jeb Bush, and some have not done a particularly good job, like Ted Cruz. We have plenty of time. My sense is the field is divided into two groups. The first is the group from which the nominee is likely to come, which would be Bush, Rubio and Walker. The second tier has a shot at jumping into the first tier if they score early and sustain it.

“Then we have some people who are interesting, but not likely to win the nomination. The most obvious of those is Donald Trump (whose polling shows a very high unfavorable rating).”

**What about Democrats? You think it will definitely be Hillary, or is there any substance to the recent wave of support for Sen. Bernie Sanders?**

“There’s substance, but the problem is that while you have a very liberal turnout in the Iowa caucuses, and New Hampshire is a more liberal state, there aren’t a lot of Burlingtons and Benningtons and Berkeleys and San Franciscos. There are a lot more Indianapolises and Evansvilles. While he runs well with the hard left, if you’re not very liberal, he’s not your cup of tea.

“(Clinton) will be the nominee, but it won’t be as easy as people think.”

**Gay marriage has obviously been a hot button in political news of late. Do you think the GOP needs to adjust its stance on gay marriage and do you anticipate that happening?**

“I’m not certain it will be removed from our platform. But when you have a Supreme Court decision like this, it’s like what



Karl Rove poses in the crowd at the 2008 Republican National Convention in Saint Paul, Minnesota.

happened with abortion. It takes a while for the advocates of traditional values to re-gear and figure out what their next priority is. In this instance, it's making certain this does not undermine the religious liberty of our institutions and believers and make them do something that is counter to their faith. We'll see how it all plays out, but Supreme Court decisions on big social issues like this tend to have a long reverberation."

**The Supreme Court has dominated the news recently with monumental decisions on the key issues of our time? Does that branch now have too much power?**

"I worry about the judicial branch when it usurps the legislative authority – and I worry about the executive branch when it usurps the legislative authority as well. Even if you support gay marriage, I think this, like abortion, would have been better resolved through the political and legislative process.

"But they've settled that, so all I can do is grumble about it."

**What about the Tea Party? Is it still a prominent faction in the GOP, and do you think it's been a positive or negative influence in the party?**

"It's been both, but far more positive than negative. You have to take the good and bad together. If you have a lot of new people come into politics, they are energetic, fresh and focused on a goal. On the other hand, they tend to think they can get it all quickly, and if they want it, it's theirs. But that's not how the system works. Our Constitution was built by very smart men who did not want government to operate smoothly, efficiently or quickly. They saw that happen with the British monarch, so they made it slow and unwieldy ...

"For a lot of people in the Tea Party, they've figured out you have to compromise and work hard, and others think they are being screwed because they want it all and it's not happening the way they want it to so they get upset. ... My hope is they become a constructive part of the system, and that has happened with many in the Tea Party so far."

**You obviously know the Bushes well. What do you think is the biggest misconception about President George W. Bush? What should people know about him that they**

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## Carville

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**Do you think Donald Trump's recent controversial remarks (the latest, as of this interview, being derogatory statements about Mexicans crossing the border and raping women) are hurting the Republican brand? The GOP leadership seems to be concerned about that.**

"Yes I do. The reason is there are a considerable number of Republicans who agree with him. It's exposing there are people out there who believe that. That's a part of that party that is not going to go away with time. When he goes away, somebody will pick it up again."

**Moving to a lighter topic, what did you think of Bill Hader's impression of you on "Saturday Night Live?"**

"It was good! I loved it! I'm sorry to see him (leave the show). He would even do things like get the right necktie and add mannerisms."

**Yeah, I've never seen you do that shoulder shimmy move.** (Laughs.) "Right. He added his own things, but you could tell



Rove talks politics at California's Claremont McKenna College.

**likely don't?**

"He is a Yale history major and has a Harvard MBA – the first MBA to be President of the United States. He likes to come across as the good ol' boy from West Texas that he is, but is also extremely well read and absorbs and retains lots of information. He has a very curious mind, asks good questions and doesn't think he's the smartest guy in the room. He wants information from people who know more about a subject than he does, which is exactly the kind of trait you want in an executive."

**What is your relationship like with Mr. Carville, with whom you'll be speaking at our event?**

"Don't tell anybody, but I like him a lot. I think he's funny, smart as hell and, like Lee Atwater, he has an intuitive sense of how people think. I don't want to be seen praising him in public because it will ruin his reputation, but I think the world of James. He's a wonderful guy and I love his wife. He's a doting father, a patriot and a really fine person.

"I think the (Annual Awards Dinner) will be fabulous. Thanks for having us."

they put some thought into it. It was flattering they would do that. He's a talented guy."

**What is your relationship like with Karl Rove, with whom you'll be speaking at our event?**

"I like Karl. We've done a number of these together. It's good when we talk about the observational part of politics – the art of politics. (Regarding ideology,) he obviously has his views and I have mine, but the stuff we've done together has been more analytical than ideological.

He has a justifiable reputation of being a smart guy. Most of the times I do something with him, I walk away learning something.

During these talks, I like to give people two things to laugh at and two things to think about. I look forward to it and I think it will be a great event, and there are really nice people in Indiana. It's hard to find nicer people anywhere in the world."