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Off to the Show

The ring always believes that the finger lives for it.

—Malcom de Chazal

Wayne Slater, Austin bureau chief of the *Dallas Morning News*, stepped outside of a rope line to make sure Karl Rove had no trouble finding him in the crowd. Until that moment, Slater had been inconspicuous among the supporters and journalists gathered on the airport tarmac in Manchester, New Hampshire. The correspondent assumed Texas Governor George W. Bush's senior strategist was certainly going to be present when his boss arrived on a charter flight from Iowa for the debate at WMUR-TV. He knew Rove wanted to discuss the story he had written for that morning's edition of the Dallas paper.

Slater hardly saw Rove approach. Whether from the chill air or his anger, Rove's face was pink as it hovered inches away from the reporter. His index finger swung like a saber across Slater's chest.

"You're trying to ruin me," Rove charged. "My reputation. You son-of-a-bitch. It's my reputation."

"What are you talking about?"

Slater did not immediately connect Rove's anger with the story he had written for the paper that day. The intensity was out of proportion to what Slater perceived as a minor piece of reporting.

"That story, damn you. It's wrong. You're trying to ruin my reputation."

"Karl, everything I wrote is true."

"No, it isn't, you son of a bitch."

The two moved closer together, their coat lapels practically brushing, displaying the kind of overt anger that might abruptly turn physical. Slater reminded Rove they had previously discussed these matters, specifically, his dirty tricks as a young Republican.

"No, no, no! It's wrong."

Rove's finger was punching Slater firmly in the chest.

"Look, Karl, you forget it was me you kept calling about the FBI and the ag commissioner and what he was doing. You called me about the railroad commissioner's degree problem. You can say whatever you want to these other guys, but you can't deny this stuff to me. You were calling me. It was you and me, buddy."

Slater lightly touched Rove's chest with his index finger, as the consultant had done to him.

"Don't you touch me," Rove sputtered.

The extreme reaction did not make sense. Rove was fairly practiced at anger management and was more likely to slice up reporters with an intellectually condescending rebuke. Probably, the consultant was edgy because it was the day of the 2000 Republican Presidential Primary's initial debate. In Rove's mind, it must have seemed like the stars were lining up precisely as he had ordered. The Dallas story was a blemish on the face of Rove's beautifully executed campaign plan. There was no other explanation for his response. Two of Slater's colleagues watched in astonishment as Rove continued his rant, inches from the reporter's nose.

"You son-of-a-bitch. You said I taught dirty tricks."

"You did, Karl."

"No, no, no."

"The *Washington Post* reported it, Karl."

Slater reminded Rove that he had never protested a profile he had written months before, which referred to the *Post* story.

"They said it. A newspaper said it, okay. But you wrote that I flat-out did it."

"Well, that's because you did."

"A newspaper said I did."

Rove knew that the story was certain to be picked up by a growing group of national reporters who, from now on, would simply state that Rove was a master of dirty tricks. In his view, nobody had ever proved he was involved in campaign skullduggery. A newspaper had reported it, yes, but his opponents based their belief that Rove had used dirty tricks on unsubstantiated allegations in a political race years ago as a young Republican.

Slater pressed the issue. Rove did not deny the dirty tricks as a young Republican, but he continued to insist the Dallas story went too far.

"You son-of-a-bitch. You stay away from me," he hissed at Slater. "I'm not going to let you ruin my reputation."

Slater, left conspicuously alone between the rope lines as Rove abruptly stalked off, shrugged and moved toward the candidate coming from the plane. Less than a half hour later, inside the small general aviation terminal at the Manchester airport, he encountered Rove again.

"Hey, how's it goin'?" Slater asked.

"I'm fine," Rove answered.

Already, the strategist was moving on to more pressing matters. The confrontation with Slater was just another campaign event, part strategy, part emotion. Karl Rove has a fine eye for working journalists up to the edge, bullying and cajoling, and then pulling back. Rove had made his point. In the future, the reporter, and those in the campaign press corps watching from a few feet away, might exercise more caution when writing about him.

Rove was incapable of ignoring the *Dallas Morning News* piece or the journalist who had filed the copy. Jumping Slater was on his list of tasks for that day, along with getting his candidate in a final state of readiness for his first national debate.

Rove actually had sufficient reasons to be upbeat and pleased with the status of his candidate's campaign on that December day in 1999. Governor Bush was arriving in New Hampshire for the debate after an inspiring trip through Iowa. People, drawn by simple curiosity as well as political inclinations, had turned out in large, enthusiastic numbers to see the Texas governor. But not much of it was spontaneous. Rove was at the controls and nothing, therefore, happened without his advice and consent. No one had ever run a presidential campaign as meticulously as Karl Rove.

The energetic rallies with hay bales and music and the growing support for George W. Bush were not simply a democracy's response to the candidate's appeal. They were also the results of the plan being unfolded by Bush's senior political advisor. Rove was a strategist who was changing the process with his ideas. His gift, perhaps more than any political advisor in history, was the ability both to visualize the broad design of a successful presidential campaign and to manage its every detail.

"Karl just dominates this," said a Republican admirer from Texas.

"Who's writing the scripts? Karl. Who's sitting there editing the film? Karl. Who's overseeing the media buy? Karl. Karl says do this and you do it. That's how he did it at Karl Rove and Company in Texas, and that's how he'll do it electing somebody president of the United States."

A man whose round face and thinning hair suggest more of a mailroom clerk than one of history's most intense political minds, Rove was in the midst of executing a 50-million-dollar maneuver to make sure his candidate won the Republican nomination for president. And voters were behaving according to plan.

The standard of performance for political advisors like Rove allows few chances at redemption. You either win your first time out,

or you are gone from the profession. Winners turn into gurus, who then focus their attention on more stately challenges within the White House, or they leave their candidate to the affairs of state and move into private business and become highly paid experts. Losers are not first choices for candidates making an initial run.

Karl Rove was not a loser, at least not back in Texas. But he had never managed a presidential campaign either. And among Bush family loyalists, there were some lingering questions about whether his successes in state elections translated to a grander national scale. Rove took little or no notice of his skeptics. They did not have his gift for seeing the inevitable outcome. They did not understand his ability to control the variables.

Rove watched it all unfold in his head, long before it took place in the voting booths of Iowa. Each element of the Bush Iowa operation was poised and ready for competition on caucus day. Rove knew how to make farmers come in from the cold fields and drafty barns, get in their pickups and drive the snowy country roads into town to vote for George W. Bush. The intuition and detailed planning that had marked all of his previous political wins was guiding him through his first Republican presidential primary season as the top strategist of Bush.

Even the best make mistakes, though. Trouble was afoot in New Hampshire and Rove's finely tuned antennae were not picking up the signals. Iowa was a state where money and structure were a sound formula for predictable results. New Hampshire was more susceptible to a grass roots uprising. Candidates had almost enough time to shake the hand of each primary voter. The less complex dynamics were allowing Senator John McCain to surge in the state that hosted the first primary and Rove did not see the dark horizon. Mistakenly, the Bush campaign had misjudged McCain's frequent trips to New Hampshire during the previous August. In Iowa, Rove did not consider McCain to be a significant threat because of his opposition to federal subsidies for gasohol production from corn. McCain also lacked any type of field organization so critical in the caucuses.

Rove was overconfident. Two months from the New Hampshire vote, he was under the impression the situation was comfortably in hand. As his candidate campaigned across the state, Rove stepped up the media buy to a level that could not be matched by McCain. Tracking polls looked good and none of the intense background checks of Governor Bush by various media had led to damaging information. Rove felt he and his candidate had little left to do except execute the plan. The primary had become pro forma.

There were annoyances, like that day's story in the *Dallas Morning News*, but Rove dealt with such minor disturbances in an expeditious fashion. The Lee Atwater and Karl Rove approach for new political operatives, mentioned in Slater's story, was first reported in a 1973 *Washington Post* article. There was not much new in Slater's piece. The story, even in the estimation of the author, bordered on innocuous.

As Slater and other journalists traveling on the Bush Campaign knew, using operatives to attack opponents, leaking harmful information, or turning rumors into weapons, as was being done against McCain, was not a new tactic for Karl Rove. If traveling reporters did not know how Rove had used those tactics in the past, they did now. In campaigns at the state level, he had also used surrogates to blast opponents with leaks, whisper campaigns, and rumors while his clients remained above the fray. A Rove candidate was always able to honestly argue that he was running a clean, issues-oriented campaign because Rove stirred up the dirt without involving his client. He made phone calls to reporters, supplied documents, and produced third-party groups with damaging allegations. This approach, already a template for the modern electoral campaign, was refined by Rove with a deadly new precision.

After his confrontation with Slater, Rove left the Manchester airport in the governor's motorcade, a row of dark Suburbans chasing police cruisers with flashing lights through the snow and rock of New Hampshire. Anyone who knew him or had worked around him knew what Rove was thinking about. Certainly, he was looking ahead to that night's debate. But the heated exchange with the re-

porter must have still lingered in his mind. Rove knew the big picture was infinitely more important than a Texas journalist writing what he considered recycled copy. No one was allowed to damage the plan Karl Rove had been building for almost a quarter century, especially not a local reporter.

Rove understood that journalists were not so much opposition as referees. Dealing with them asked little of his great intellect. True political opponents, however, were a different kind of game, and Rove brought them down with the fervor of a natural predator.

"The playing field was always different for Karl," an adversary said. "There were no out-of-bounds markers for him. He'd do anything he had to, to win, even if that meant destroying your livelihood. A lot of times, it wasn't enough for Karl to just win. He had to crush you in the process."

The Texas political landscape was spotted with the blood of those who had been taken down by Karl Rove, and they, more than anyone in America, were confident George W. Bush was on his way to becoming president of the United States.

Karl Rove knew it, too. He knew something else, as well. This might not be only about George W. Bush. If he intended to play the role of high-profile political consultant, Rove needed to have answers for controversial matters in his own past. There were stories and allegations about things he had done. Eventually, reporters would hear about them. And then he would be the one answering questions. They were coming, no doubt about that. He just had to figure out what the answers were before he was asked. And hope his own past was of no risk to his candidate.

