

Averell "Ace" Smith: A legend among California political consultants, the San Francisco-based Smith has handled campaigns for president, governor, senator, local contenders and, perhaps most memorably, his own father. He has crisscrossed the U.S. as a political strategist and a feared practitioner of the art of opposition research – which he describes as “due diligence.” But it is in California that his impact has been most profound. Veteran journalist Carla Marinucci, who has covered dozens of political campaigns, interviewed him in his office.

Ace Smith Oral History

Interviewed by Carla Marinucci

0:00:01.7 Carla Marinucci: Welcome. I'm Carla Marinucci, and we are here for Capitol Weekly on a program that is funded by the California State Library. Our guest today is Averell "Ace" Smith. No matter what side of the aisle you're on in California, you know who Ace Smith is. If you cover politics, he is the man who was one of the most preeminent California political consultants, advisers and consiglieri to a whole roster of leading Democratic politicians. Welcome Ace Smith.

0:00:31.0 Ace Smith: Thank you.

0:00:32.3 CM: Well, there's so much to get to. Let's just start at the beginning.

0:00:35.3 AS: Sure.

0:00:36.5 CM: Your parents were staunch Democrats. You were named for Averell Harriman, the former governor of New York, a Democratic statesman. Your brother, Adlai. What was it like growing up in that family? And of course, your father, known to many in California politics, was Arlo Smith, the former District Attorney of San Francisco.

0:01:00.5 AS: Yeah, and it was probably a very unique way to grow up, but it's funny. My father's political history goes back a long ways before he was district attorney. He grew up as a poor kid in San Bernardino County, the only one in his family who got past high school. Got a degree on the GI Bill of Rights, and then made his way to Boalt Hall and literally had to sell his things to move to San Francisco to take a job in Pat Brown's Attorney General's office.

0:01:38.5 CM: That's right, yeah.

0:01:39.2 AS: And so that was really the beginning. And so, complete outsider, didn't know anyone, but they just liked this young kid who had just graduated from Boalt.

0:01:54.5 CM: And you were just steeped in Democratic politics from the start. I mean, how so?

How did your dad influence you?

0:02:04.9 AS: Well, and my mom always joked that she... Well, the first question she'd ask him when they were dating was, "Are you a Democrat?"

0:02:14.3 CM: So let's stop at that line.

0:02:16.3 AS: Stop it right there.

0:02:17.1 CM: Right. And the nickname "Ace," where did that come from?

0:02:23.9 AS: Very simple. There is no, say, child under three years who can say the word Averell. I can hardly say it, and so it got shortened to Ace very quickly.

0:02:36.5 CM: It stuck. It stuck. I mean, your father, as you mentioned, worked for Pat Brown, himself became a candidate for California Attorney General and as we know lost the race against Dan Lungren. I've read that, for you, the son, it was a lesson well learned ... And you've said it yourself. Sometimes losses can be the best lessons. What did you learn from your father's career that helped you as you moved forward in politics?

0:03:09.4 AS: You learn what you want from it. And it's just human beings being human beings. Human beings, we all tend to be a little more arrogant than we should be. And so when we win something, we think that we're brilliant, and you don't really reflect as much as you should until you lose something. And that was one of the most gut-wrenching, horrible losses, truly, of my life. And learned a lot of things from that race, but it's like a couple of other races like that. But you really dig in and you analyze. And in that particular case, I really realized that I needed to have a... One of the ways we got beat in that race was our opponent understood the power and breadth and reach of cable TV, and he just barely... He beat us just by a whisker.

0:04:05.5 CM: Yeah.

0:04:06.4 AS: And so I really started exploring a lot of things like that and seeing the reason why we lost that race, and I really believe that that was probably the main reason.

0:04:16.9 CM: And I know that one of the first campaigns you actually worked on was for McGovern.

0:04:22.5 AS: Oh, yeah, absolutely.

0:04:23.5 CM: And you were how old? [laughter]

0:04:25.5 AS: 13 years old.

0:04:25.9 CM: 13. [laughter]

0:04:26.2 AS: I have a... There you go, Carla. (Ace shows Carla a polling precinct document)

0:04:29.6 CM: There you go. [laughter] So the polling places.

0:04:32.8 AS: A polling place, yeah. And look at that. That was handwritten in.

0:04:37.3 CM: You're right. [chuckle] You went to college and majored in English Lit of all things, not politics.

0:04:49.8 AS: Well, can you imagine? Okay, so the institutions of higher learning are dumb enough to give you a degree for reading books. [laughter] And it's like, what are you doing?

0:04:58.9 CM: Yeah, good point there. [laughter]

0:05:00.0 AS: In all seriousness, I read books for pleasure, and it's like, okay. But also in all seriousness, I took a few political science courses in a time that the major theory was pluralism. And I had been very steeped in politics in the political club movement and worked on campaigns. And I just didn't think it had anything to do with the reality of any of the politics I knew or I was experiencing.

0:05:31.3 CM: Yeah.

0:05:31.7 AS: And so I was like, "Why am I gonna study this theory that doesn't seem in sync with reality?"

0:05:37.6 CM: And it was in these years, I guess, that you started to look at working in politics. You went to work for Rahm Emanuel, shortly after, right?

0:05:51.1 AS: That's a little bit later.

0:05:51.6 CM: Yeah.

0:05:54.7 AS: I worked on a number of key things, but really, my first really deep dive was I was a junior at Berkley when my dad ran for D.A. And I took the quarter off to work on the campaign, and I worked every day on the campaign as a volunteer. And really that's it, you know.

0:06:11.8 CM: And is that where a lot of... As we know the patterns of what you've done all through your career is finding the votes, where they are, turning out the votes. Is that where you learned some of those?

0:06:23.2 AS: One hundred percent. ... Another thing, it's like dancing with electrons, you can just wave a wand and bring anything up. In those days...

0:06:38.1 CM: Yeah, what did it involve...?

0:06:39.6 AS: We had precinct maps and very crude calculators and would take maps of the precincts and color code them all and figure out where we needed to go and what the turnouts (were), etcetera, etcetera. But actually, you hit on a really important point, which is, I think one of the unique things about doing politics in California versus doing politics in most of the rest of the country is very simply this is, and I'll get back to your question about finding where the votes are.

0:07:16.6 CM: Yeah.

0:07:18.6 AS: But in California at large, you almost never have the money -- because the media markets are so expensive -- to kind of like order everything on the menu. If you're doing a race in Iowa or almost anywhere else in America, right, you can go down the menu and say, "Oh, TV, radio, direct mail..." You just order everything on the menu. Okay, and then, in California, because things are always so expensive, you actually have to make really tough decisions about how you're gonna spend your money.

0:07:53.9 AS: And the biggest mistake you can make in California is spreading your money too thin and trying to order everything on the menu, because you'll actually get such small bite-size pieces that you'll starve almost immediately, and you won't run a campaign of any effect. And so it really requires very, very hard choices and it's much more like doing, say triage in a Civil War Hospital or something.

0:08:24.8 CM: Yeah, yeah.

0:08:24.8 AS: Some things are gonna make it and some things aren't. And you just have to be brutal about the decisions you make, which has always led us to believe that the way you win a campaign is to figure out where the votes are that you need to get, how many do you need, and then what is the best way to get those votes? And in a statewide race, that probably doesn't involve a huge deal that way. In the traditional sense of the word, there's lots of workarounds. 'Cause if you, if you actually wanted to do something like most congressional races do, it would probably cost you 40 million bucks.

0:08:58.6 CM: Right, right, I mean, in those early years watching your dad... And of course your dad was here in San Francisco in the middle of it, when Moscone and Milk were assassinated, you were watching this whole era of San Francisco politics and you started to become involved in races here.

0:09:17.0 AS: Yes.

0:09:18.4 CM: Including, Harry Britt versus Nancy Pelosi I think the only race where she was ever challenged for that seat.

0:09:27.1 AS: Yeah.

0:09:27.2 CM: Oh wait, are you serious?

0:09:27.3 AS: Yeah.

0:09:29.4 CM: And Harry Britt was your client?

0:09:31.7 AS: He wasn't my client.

0:09:32.5 CM: Oh, he was not?

0:09:33.9 AS: Harry Britt was... Harry, I was working for a guy named John Molinari.

0:09:37.6 CM: Oh, oh, yes right.

0:09:38.6 AS: And we were supporting Harry Britt.

0:09:42.0 CM: Yes.

0:09:42.4 AS: And help but not professionally.

0:09:44.3 CM: Oh, you weren't...

0:09:44.7 AS: I was actually working at the board of supervisors.

0:09:46.9 CM: That's good.

0:09:47.1 AS: At the time.

0:09:47.7 CM: Yeah, yeah.

0:09:48.1 AS: But was well versed in that race.

0:09:52.9 CM: And, as we know, Britt lost to Pelosi, but not by much.

0:09:57.8 AS: True.

0:10:00.7 CM: Things could have been way different had that race gone the other way.

0:10:06.6 AS: True. True. And Nancy Pelosi, thank goodness she won that race.

0:10:08.4 CM: Yeah, yeah.

0:10:08.9 AS: That was.

0:10:09.8 CM: So watching, and I know Gavin Newsom has also said this too. San Francisco politics is a tremendous laboratory.

0:10:19.7 AS: Oh, it's even more than that.

0:10:20.9 CM: How is, how is it?

0:10:22.3 AS: It's a laboratory, but people keep on wondering, okay, why do most of the statewide folks emerge? But also, why are these national folks? Let's go through them. Nancy Pelosi, Gavin Newsom is more or less a national figure, Kamala Harris, and even back to Phil Burton. We can name a lot of people. And the reason is really simply this: If you play baseball in the Dominican Leagues, you may actually be playing tougher baseball than in the Major Leagues. And actually the game here, especially in those days, was so tough that to actually succeed and to make it through, you had to be beyond Major League level.

0:11:13.9 CM: Yeah.

0:11:14.4 AS: You were gonna be far more talented than someone coming out of almost anywhere else in the country.

0:11:18.4 CM: Right.

0:11:18.9 AS: And just imagine these races in the 1970s, just like what's a day in the life of a candidate running, let's say, for mayor in 1975? 1979? Okay. You would wake up in the morning, your race was gonna be covered by probably, three TV stations, two newspapers. Not to mention a bunch of community newspapers. And you'd wake up and you do have to raise money and go to events, but then at night you would go to political club after political club and organization and neighborhood group.

0:12:02.5 CM: Right.

0:12:03.1 AS: And actually have to engage in debates and engage in forums and engage in real exchanges, probably, three to five a night, for a period of months.

0:12:14.0 CM: Yeah.

0:12:14.6 AS: And you would have radio debates, you'd have TV debates. It was really a tough league.

0:12:22.5 CM: Yeah. And that's interesting you said that. 'Cause I wanna talk about, obviously, how the whole business has changed. Your business has changed, but that's one example. You

don't see politicians doing that anymore. You don't see candidates doing that anymore.

0:12:35.1 AS: It's not possible.

0:12:37.5 CM: Why is it not possible? But also has the cell phone changed all that? That is...

0:12:41.9 AS: No.

0:12:42.8 CM: In the sense of candidates are more afraid now of going to club after club and being put up on YouTube for...

0:12:51.5 AS: But they don't exist. It's...

0:12:53.9 CM: Yeah. Yeah.

0:12:54.8 AS: I mean, at least in my humble opinion, the real reason is the death of the daily newspapers. And let's be fair, I know that's the world you came from, but the Chronicle and the LA Times and Sacramento Bee are behind paywalls, small readership. But also up to a certain amount of time, if something ran on the front page of one of those newspapers, it would then be on the radio and TV that night, and it would probably have a life cycle of -- you know this better than anyone -- four or five days, maybe a week, if something runs on the front page of these newspapers today, it's just no one reads it and it dies. And so, there's the old saying, "All politics is local," (but) the opposite is true now: "All politics is national."

0:13:47.9 AS: So back to your question about the cell phone. How do you get on someone's cellphone, on someone's iPhone? Okay, you get on the iPhone by, being in the current of national politics So why, for instance, in the polling just this morning, why are two congress people leading in the U.S. Senate race from Southern California ...?

0:14:10.7 CM: Right.

0:14:12.1 AS: ...when 25 years ago, a congress person from Southern California, this guy who tried it, whose name was Mel Levine, was hardly registered. Because all of the sudden, being in the national news cycle is the way you get you on people's phones and I always kind of view it like this, it's like there's a news pyramid.

0:14:36.2 CM: Right, right.

0:14:37.1 AS: If you're the consumer, and it used to be the bottom of the pyramid where the most information was local, state, the national, international, and it has literally flipped. And so all due respect to the California newspapers, which I love. One story in the New York Times is worth...

0:14:58.5 CM: Yes.

0:15:00.1 AS: Dozens.

0:15:00.5 CM: Yeah, we've seen some change... This goes to how the business operates and how campaigns operate and certainly you know more about this than just about anybody in California. You became known as somebody who was... who sort of made the area of opposition research an important part of a campaign. To go back to your work with Rahm Emanuel, can you tell us about, first of all, how you started working with him ...

0:15:28.5 AS: Oh, sure, sure.

0:15:29.7 CM: ... in the DCCC, and that's sort of where your work in opposition research began, right?

0:15:33.0 AS: Yeah, yeah, it was actually a very selfish thing ... I was doing campaigns in California and there were two very distinct worlds. There were campaigns being run in California, but really the king of those was Clint Riley and there was very much a California model, which was a consultant-driven model. And in the rest of the country, campaigns were being run ... it was the media people and the pollsters and others.

0:16:04.3 CM: Right.

0:16:04.9 AS: It was more of a group thing and I'm not saying one system's better than the other, but there was a whole world of politics I wanted to go explore and learn about that was never accessible from California. And so I had kind of been doing my own opposition research home brew, and it really wasn't at much ... So I was kind of making it all up. And, it really dawned on me that the national people didn't know how to do it. So I actually, honestly, I just like went with a friend back to DC and started meeting with people. And I met with this little guy named Rahm Emanuel, who is political director of the DCCC and we had a great meeting. And I said, "Look, I, here's what I do. Here's some of the stuff I've done. Give me a race somewhere and tell me if you like it, we'll do more and, if you don't, I don't know." I did a race for him down in Florida, and I didn't realize how lucky I was at the time, but I was able to come back with a report and he looked at it, I think it was one of his top races, and he went, "Whew, cross that one off the list!"

0:17:13.7 AS: And so I did something like 20 races with him that year, some big volume and then he went to work for a guy named Richard Daley – and this is 1989 -- who's running for mayor of Chicago and doing the media, a guy named David Axelrod and so I go... I literally go to Chicago, don't know the first darn thing about Chicago, to do their research on the campaign and that's how I really ultimately became partners with Rahm in that business and got to know Axelrod and all these other people. But anyway, my very selfish reason for doing all this was I wanted to meet all the pollsters and the people.

0:18:04.5 CM: To get...

0:18:06.4 AS: All the people, the Frank Greers...

0:18:10.4 CM: The people who were making it happen.

0:18:10.5 AS: Yeah. And Jeff Gary Anderson.

0:18:10.4 CM: Making the sausage. Yeah.

0:18:11.9 AS: And all these people who had their fingers in all the big campaigns in America.

0:18:15.5 CM: Yeah, yeah.

0:18:16.2 AS: So that's really why I did it.

0:18:17.1 CM: Many people called you the Doctor Death of opposition research, somebody who was so formidable in it. Can you talk a little bit about how opposition research back then differed from ... Today, it's Google it, any citizen or that many citizen journalists do and put up their own opposition research on Twitter. What did it involve? Remind people, what did it involve in the days when there was no internet?

0:18:44.4 AS: Really, the problem is flipped today, the problem is almost you have too much information. And I would say, I'm not sure the opposition research is so much better now than it was. And for a very simple reason: There's so much information that the skill in opposition research is not doing the research. Anyone can do the research. That's just work. The skill is in understanding what you're seeing and understanding the political value of it and the news value of it. And so, yes, it's good to know how to do research, but it's way better to know when you're looking at this massive amount of material, to know, okay, what's good, what's usable, what's not good? What should I spend more time looking at? What is useful in the context of this race? What contrasts, are we trying to drive? And I think the funny thing about all this stuff about Doctor Death and etcetera, etcetera [laughter] it's like, I don't know if you were running a big company, you would do your due diligence. I think you would want know about your competitors. I think it's just like basic due diligence.

0:19:53.5 CM: Right.

0:19:54.2 AS: Duh. You should know.

0:19:55.9 CM: But you've always talked about how one of the first things you should do is vet your own candidate. Was that a new thing?

0:20:02.5 AS: Yeah, and I say within reason. Within reason, because sometimes you can get so in your head about your own potential problems that you get afraid of doing anything, and that's a little bit of the challenge of doing that. I'm more of a believer that you should, yes, you

should look at your own candidate and you should try and identify more than anything, things that you can fix, and then things that you going to have to deal with and figure out how to deal with. But beyond that, like I say on the opposition, back in the day when you were doing this it was a matter of spending hours in libraries and newspaper morgues -- you know this better than I do. And back when I was doing it, say in the first cycle I was doing in 1988, I would fly to a congressional district somewhere, dig through everything and order tons of records and have some other people helping me. And then I would just start shipping these boxes back in my house and these boxes would show up at my house, and I would go through them all and have some people, and then put together a report for the DCCC.

0:21:20.7 CM: And it is what you said, knowing what you've got and knowing, but also part of this art is knowing how to get it out there in the public, 'cause as a reporter on the other side...

0:21:31.6 AS: So as you know I had done...

0:21:32.8 CM: Tell us a little bit about...

0:21:37.0 AS: So I had done press, and.

0:21:38.1 AS: So I run campaigns, I had done press. You have to understand all those things. It'd be like, building a race car, right? And never having raced or know what the racetrack looks like. It's like you, you'd probably build something that would fly off the track in two seconds. You have to know where you're racing and who you're racing against.

0:22:06.7 CM: I also remember, in terms of your research and the way you got it done, I know I've gotten books from you, that you've gotten from the library or whatever, that have like a million post-it notes in it. You're obsessive about this stuff.

0:22:25.9 AS: Yeah. Well, if you want me to go at research, you need to be able to take in a massive amount of material but, more than anything, know what's important and what's not important.

0:22:39.1 CM: And what's your secret about how you get this out to the public? Obviously you worked with reporters, you've worked with reporters for a long time.

0:22:45.4 AS: Oh, there's this ace reporter from the San Francisco Chronicle? What was her name?

0:22:53.2 CM: What's her, I mean.

0:22:54.1 AS: We may have talked in the past.

[laughter]

0:22:56.5 CM: Yes. We may have actually.

0:22:58.3 AS: About certain things.

0:23:00.9 CM: But that is also part of the work is as you said, knowing what you have and knowing how to release it to the public.

0:23:08.5 AS: Yeah. And, knowing what's newsworthy, what's not newsworthy. A lot of research is, more than anything, just also seeing the context and ...

0:23:28.8 CM: Yeah.

0:23:29.9 AS: ... to illustrate the point: Abortion as an issue, believe it or not, did not really become a major issue really (until) after the Wheeler decision. And I wanna say that was probably around 1989 or '90.

0:23:58.2 CM: Mm-hmm.

0:23:58.2 AS: So let's say you were doing research on a congressional race or say a legislative race, or maybe even gubernatorial, all of a sudden you have this issue that's very relevant. But going back in time looking at someone's record, because it wasn't deemed a big issue at the time, a lot of times a candidate's, either your candidate or your opponent's record, wouldn't be in the reported news.

0:24:24.7 CM: Mm-hmm.

0:24:25.1 AS: Right? So it'd be, let's say there'd be some resolution in the state Legislature that no one thought was important, it wasn't reported on, but all of a sudden you have this issue that's a major national issue. And so you had better find out if your candidate or your opponent had ever actually dealt with this issue, maybe answered a questionnaire

0:24:50.5 CM: Mm-hmm.

0:24:50.7 AS: ...maybe him voting on a resolution in a state legislature. I was always stunned at the number of things that weren't in what I would call the reported record. But that when you went back in time and had to say, "This is a major issue," to go, you know, contextualize it. And so that was also a big part of research.

0:25:13.0 CM: Yeah. Actually, you worked for the Clintons, you worked for Bill Clinton and you actually had sort of a situation where you found a letter.

0:25:22.8 AS: I didn't find that letter. [laughter]

0:25:24.3 CM: Or the letter to the draft. The letter to the draft board.

0:25:27.1 AS: I did not find that letter.

0:25:28.6 CM: You didn't find it personally or...

0:25:29.7 AS: No, no, no. I'm convinced that what happened on that was that the...

0:25:34.7 CM: We should explain it was a letter for the draft board where he...

0:25:36.8 AS: Yeah.

0:25:38.3 CM: He explained why he...

0:25:38.3 AS: No one knew about the...

0:25:39.1 CM: He didn't need to go to.

0:25:39.9 AS: No one did not. I wish I had my hands on that letter.

0:25:41.9 CM: Yeah.

0:25:42.0 AS: No one knew about the existence of that letter. I believe to this day, and you'd have to check the record, that the member of the draft board actually kept the letter. It was not a part of the public record.

0:25:56.4 CM: And you...

0:25:58.5 AS: I no, I did not, you know?

0:26:00.8 CM: Yeah.

0:26:01.0 AS: It was a big issue. But yeah, I wish I had the letter because he had to answer for it and I didn't have it and I think that that was the case.

0:26:10.9 CM: In your work, did you ever find out something about a candidate that you regretted or that you couldn't put out there?

0:26:19.2 AS: That I was working for?

0:26:19.7 CM: Yes, yes.

0:26:20.6 AS: Nothing, nothing that's...

0:26:23.4 CM: Nothing that you wanna talk about.

0:26:25.9 AS: No, nothing. I mean, nothing that's too dramatic. Some of the most eye-opening stuff was when I was doing stuff for Richard Daley in Chicago.

0:26:39.1 CM: Yes.

0:26:42.5 AS: I would go through the some of our opponents, and I'd be like, he did *what?! You know, one guy was, I think I remember regularly was accused of killing someone. I was like, okay, just a little California boy here.*

0:26:53.8 CM: I mean what do you say to people who call this a dark art or an immoral part of politics, there are just criticism of opposition research.

0:27:09.8 AS: First of all, I think it should be part of the public debate, use someone's strengths and weaknesses, I think it's just basic due diligence and if it was so evil and bad, why do every journalistic body in America for over 200 years publish it?

0:27:47.3 CM: And has it changed in this whole part of the business? Does that underscore how a George Santos ...?

0:28:00.5 AS: Well, that's a jaw dropping thing. Listen, I we touched on it earlier that's with the internet. It's really easy for goodness sakes, there's AI... you can say, "Write me a report on George Santos," and it will write you up, you know, and it's really easy to put together these, a lot of information on someone without kind of seeing what you really need to see. Back to my original point, which is good political research is not done by researchers. Good political research is done by people who understand politics and press and communications and all those things, and some history.

0:28:45.9 CM: Yes right.

0:28:47.0 AS: Because otherwise you end up with a bunch of information and no one's saying what's ... Like anyone doing George Santos the first thing they would've tripped on would be like, [laughter], there's some problems with his story ...

0:28:58.2 CM: There's a mini-story.

0:29:00.7 AS: And then if you were a good researcher, you should then spend the rest of your energy and time figuring out, okay .. here's what always happens in these things is, if you generally speaking human beings tend to be pretty simple and if that's someone's pattern, generally they will have repeated it multiple times. It's usually not just one slip.

0:29:22.4 CM: Yeah, and I wanna talk about all the campaigns you've worked on, but just one last thing on opposition research. Was your campaign, you think that the opposition research or you made the most difference? Are, you know, I mean, there's, I can think of.

0:29:38.8 AS: Oh my goodness.

0:29:38.9 CM: Several of them but.

0:29:39.1 AS: No many, many campaigns and I probably wouldn't wanna go into them just for...

0:29:44.6 CM: So there's not one one that stands out. I mean, I.

0:29:50.2 AS: No, there's a lot that stand out, but it's just like, I don't...

0:29:53.0 CM: Yeah.

0:29:53.4 AS: How much, how...

0:29:57.9 CM: Whether that's the single most important factor.

0:30:00.6 AS: No, no, no, but also whether the clients involved would be happy about me talking about it.

0:30:03.4 CM: Okay I understand, let's talk about some of the campaigns that you've managed. And there's such a list of them here in California, but when we go back to some of the major ones that certainly everyone remembers Villaraigosa for mayor of Los Angeles. Just to set it up, for those who don't remember, Antonio Villaraigosa was aiming to become the first Hispanic mayor since the 19th century, and he was aiming to defeat a mayor, the first sitting mayor in 32 years in California, James Hahn that's a huge lift. How did you approach that campaign?

0:30:41.1 AS: That was a great campaign and had an incredibly talented candidate. You've met Antonio. There's like, he has a quality, I mean, huge amount of talent, that man. I had worked on his 2001 race that he narrowly lost. And it's probably an example of learning some things and then applying them. And I really believe that he had lost that 2001 race because the more moderate vote in LA was just not quite sure in these issues of public safety and other things...

0:31:27.3 CM: Yeah.

0:31:28.8 AS: ... make them feel you'll really be a voice for them. And so a lot of that race had to do with really getting, first of all, it was a huge field.

0:31:48.7 CM: Yeah.

0:31:49.3 AS: Which was wild. And it was still in the days when you had tons of forums and debates and things.

0:31:55.3 CM: Yeah.

0:31:55.3 AS: And so it was really a matter of and he's served in the city council was really kind of letting voters know that he was really steeped in the local issues. He really understood their concerns. And one of the things ironically that we lean on was increasing the police force to 10,000 members. And it was a matter of being able to reach past just the, kinda like the base vote.

0:32:26.5 CM: Yeah.

0:32:27.0 AS: There's a number of these races where it's really easy to sit here as someone who worked on the race and say, Ah it was all me. It wasn't brilliant. I mean these also require having really, really talented people who people see and they shine through and people like Antonio is really one of those people.

0:32:53.0 CM: Yeah. Yeah. That was a race where.

0:32:55.0 AS: Just truly charismatic.

0:32:56.0 CM: That was a race where there was some opposition research that did matter. I remember you unearthed a minor billing scandal in Department of Water and Power involving James Hahn.

0:33:09.3 AS: That was something that people had already been chewing on and obviously we were, it was something that we were obviously running on. The funny thing about that race was, this is in the days when you know there's like three maybe, there were four television stations that would literally go out and cover anything we did.

[laughter

PART II

0:33:47.1 AS: So Hahn he was kind of a, anyway he was kind of a head shaking thing. He had really not done much as mayor for three years at least in a public... He wasn't out there. And all of a sudden he starts running and realize he has a challenge. And so all of a sudden he decides that he needs to hold these press conferences every day and tell people what he was doing. And so I would personally show up to every one of his press conferences with a rebuttal and they really got under their skin. And so every night the news would be and we'd have Jim Hahn with his version of events and me with my version of events and they were always like going after me and I'm thinking, okay let me get this right. Okay. You're pulling on a chess board here, you're the king. I'm a pawn. Why are you fighting me? It's like I'll take that any day of the week, it's like God Bless you.

0:34:48.1 CM: Yeah. And it speaks to the changing nature of California campaigns. But yeah that was a really important race for a lot of reasons. But you're right Antonio was something to

watch.

0:34:56.5 AS: Antonio was truly, truly, truly talented.

0:35:00.5 CM: Yeah. Something to watch. Let's go to Jerry Brown's campaign for Attorney General which I certainly remember. too. He was up against Rocky Delgadillo in the primary and Chuck Poochigian in the general election. Okay. What was it like to work with Jerry Brown back then?

0:35:16.9 AS: Jerry Brown is a pleasure. You know, it's like a lot of people in politics tend to be very kind of a little too one dimensional about politics in their own career. Jerry is one of those unique people who like has a gazillion interests in a lot of different things. And so you can sit there any day and you could be talking about Roman history or Camus or you name it, all in the course of a conversation about like whether or not we should go to L.A. and appear at a forum. So I mean what a great pleasure. And the thing about Jerry, too, that is really remarkable is at one point I said, look I really need to kind of get my head around all your vetoes and whatnot. And so I read through all of his veto messages and whatnot. I started asking him, and he knew like every detail about every one like going back years and years, years and years and years.

0:36:31.9 CM: Didn't he? I mean, were you worried at all? I remember Jerry Brown was a talk show host for a long time. He had a very freewheeling show. There were a lot of tapes out there.

0:36:40.6 AS: No luckily, no there weren't. There weren't.

0:36:43.0 CM: Oh, there were not?

0:36:43.4 AS: No.

0:36:46.5 CM: Tell me about that. I mean.

0:36:48.4 AS: No thank goodness they weren't.

0:36:49.2 CM: Was there any point in which you were worried about, you know, he had a long record in could have been used against him in some respects?

0:36:56.5 AS: No, no. As a matter of fact, I'll tell you this is actually kind of an interesting story about how do you actually use opposition research? If you can call it that. It's really due diligence. But one of the things that was really obvious was that when we hit the general against our Republican opponent.

0:37:18.2 CM: Yes. Right.

0:37:19.8 AS: Which is that he was going to come after us on all of his pardons and paroles, as

you know. You know, that's one of the things and until you hit George Deukmejian, and Gavin's changed it, but you really have just a complete denial of essentially all those powers to the governor, which is all. But before that time, it was people would really consider pardons and clemency and commutations and all those legitimate ways to cut someone's sentence short.

0:37:51.5 AS: And so, okay. So I was just like, okay, this is gonna be one of the first attacks ... I'm sure they're gonna try and replay that. And so I went to the state library and spent an afternoon and I pulled out every one of Ronald Reagan's pardons and commutations, there's books of them and copied them all. And so when our Republican opponent attacked Jerry, our answer was, Oh, so you must also hate Ronald Reagan. He did way more than Jerry Brown ever did. Here's the story of him, talking about how wonderful it was that he was letting a convicted murderer out. [laughter] So why don't you tell us about that, Josh?

0:38:36.1 CM: At one point the Republicans tried to attack Jerry Brown saying he wasn't qualified to be Attorney General because he hadn't been a practicing lawyer. Am I right on that?

0:38:45.8 AS: Yes, Yeah.

0:38:46.6 CM: Wasn't it Tom Del Beccaro who sued him. At any point were you worried about any of that being an issue?

0:38:53.6 AS: No, because we had done all the legal due diligence. But again, I just thought that was one of those silly things where it's okay to throw sticks in some spokes like that but they have a guy running who really no one's ever heard of. He's from the Central Valley, a smart impressive man. But like throwing sticks at Jerry Brown? ...

0:39:28.6 AS: You have to, in order to get someone to vote for you, yeah, you do need to probably question the other person somewhat, but you also need to sell them on you.

0:39:38.9 CM: Yeah.

0:39:41.0 AS: ... and I just thought that was a lot of wasted effort.

0:39:43.0 CM: Yeah, how was Jerry Brown with money? You mentioned California. It's a place where you've gotta be careful about where you spend your money and we know Jerry Brown is frugal to say the least. How did you deal with all that?

0:39:58.3 AS: Well. No, he almost... At one point, almost strangled me I think, because I had talked him into not spending any money on TV in the primary against Delgadillo. 'Cause I was convinced there was no way.

0:40:15.4 CM: Yeah.

0:40:16.4 AS: Delgadillo spent, if I remember correctly, a few million dollars on TV. And some pollster had some what I thought was very flawed research that showed Jerry going into the weekend before, showing it almost an even race and he was, as anything as he should be, he was incredibly nervous. Like, "Why, did I listen to that dummy, he told me not spend any money?" And, but it turned out that he won quite easily and, but that was all, it was incredibly important because it's hard, even for Jerry Brown, it's incredibly hard to raise money for attorney general, so if you go spend that all, I'm not even sure you can really replenish it at the end of the campaign.

0:41:06.4 CM: Yeah, I do note that there was another place where opposition research came in, where, you provided members of the press with the roster of a Canadian football team that Rocky Delgadillo said he played for, but apparently did not.

0:41:26.6 AS: Let me ask you a question. Isn't that a basic thing you should check? That's not some sort of, evil dark art thing. Someone says they blame you. I'm like, okay ... go, it's not hard to check the roster.

0:41:38.5 CM: Why is that important? It goes to the whole credibility of a...

0:41:43.8 AS: Why isn't it important it's like, come on.

0:41:45.3 CM: Yeah, it goes to...

0:41:46.6 AS: Shouldn't you, if you say something about yourself, shouldn't it be true?

0:41:50.8 CM: But this is politics as we... [laughter]

0:41:53.4 AS: Oh, I know but it's like, I don't know, It's...

0:41:55.9 CM: Okay I went to Texas I covered Hillary Clinton's primary there. I found you in some small, cheap office building, with your daughter Lily, by the way, working alongside of you, who I remember so well. There you were trying to locate every vote for her well, you talked about the Clinton campaign, both presidential campaign in Texas and California, which she was successful at, by the way, but what was the key? It was again, identifying and getting out the votes, correct?

0:42:31.0 AS: Yeah, in California that was a fascinating race because, as you know, better than anyone, Carla, the way you generally win statewide in California is in, let's say, in the Democratic primary -- which is pretty much the whole ballgame these days -- is you consolidate the vote in the Bay Area counties in the I-80 corridor. And so you need to roar out of the Bay area with margins of somewhere between 60 and 80 percent and out the I-80 corridor, 60 or so, and then whatever happens in Southern California ... There's a lot of reasons we can speculate on them, but they never consolidate like that and, so if you do that, you win, you could go back to Dianne Feinstein's primary against John Van de Kamp...

0:43:26.8 AS: ... 1990 was a classic, or, my father's race against Ira Reiner, same year, a classic example of that. So what was tricky was, okay, so, you're Hillary Clinton, you're facing ostensibly someone who should, who's going to beat you and, in the Bay Area I-80 corridor, or should...

0:43:55.0 AS: And you just can't allow it to be that substantial... So what we had to do was we had to spend a huge amount of time in the Bay Area just making sure the margins were never bulging against us, that they were reasonable. And I'd have to go back and look, but I wanna say I'm sure we lost in most of the Bay Area counties but they weren't by these massive margins. And then win in Southern California. And really the key was the Latino vote in Southern California, incredibly. It was also a matter in that election of we had really mastered at that point and this is something no one had ever heard of in the rest of the country. And so they looked at us like we were crazy. But the early vote. This was really one of the early elections for the early vote. And so we had mastered that and our whole field programs was designed at getting all these folks we had ID'd as Clinton supporters to actually get their votes in. And what happened, was Obama definitely had momentum going into the election day, but we had bagged so many votes that he was never gonna make it up. And it was the same... And you were in Texas. I mean it was very much... It was a lot of the same thing in Texas. And I believe we won in Texas based upon running up really big margins in the Latino vote.

0:45:44.3 AS: You covered a lot of it. That was a fun campaign. Bill Clinton was almost out and down there a huge amount of his time. And I would send him on these trips, there were some days he'd have like 10 stops. A lot of people who do the "building-of-events" sort of thing, they like to build things as people and our theory of the case was that we needed to do a lot more for quantity and not great. Not a bunch of like five-and 10,000-version rallies, but a ton of a thousand-version rallies and so what we actually devised and I think it was a lot of skepticism when we started doing it, but everyone eventually got on board, was we would just go from place to place and we'd put him on the back of the pickup.

0:46:40.7 CM: Yes, I remember seeing...

0:46:42.3 AS: And we would just go from place to place and there'd be a pickup and he'd go do his spiel and go on the next place and do his spiel. The other thing that was truly remarkable about watching Bill Clinton work, and I've never seen anyone else ever do this as well. If you spend the day with him. He would start the day and he had a yellow legal pad and he'd write all of his things down. And it was a really... It was always not a bunch of random stuff... He was always making encouraging argument like a lawyer, but it was also persuasive and populist. And he would start the day, he'd write his notes and then put that thing away and be in his brain... And he would start the day and I would watch him, he would be almost like a human focus group. Most politicians are human beings, not just politicians. Like when you're speaking, you're so consumed with just getting the words out right. But you don't have the ability to be like a Geiger counter, freaking it out. He would watch him and he would like watch the crowd reaction with everything he said. So that let's say he started the first event and he had five

really good applause lines. By the time he was at noon he'd have 10 and at the end of the day he'd have 20. And that's probably...

0:48:14.0 CM: ... Instinct.

0:48:14.7 AS: ...instinct, but it was also a lot of probably like what I was talking about San Francisco politics. The politics he grew up in were the politics of going from these picnics, one picnic and gathering to another all over the state, where you really had to literally almost be in the old fashioned on-the-stump. Clearly he was gifted, but you also had to develop that skill and that's the skill that you don't develop unless just like the skills you need to develop in this ecosystem.

0:48:48.9 CM: But aren't we losing that, Ace, in the sense of we're watching politicians now who don't allow the press into their events, who only go to maybe only be interviewed by Fox News or on the left the same thing kind of happens that limit them. You're not seeing people getting on the back of pickup trucks and going... I mean they're not exposing themselves to other...

0:49:12.2 AS: I don't know, as evil as he is, Donald Trump I think disproved that.

0:49:19.0 CM: Talk a little bit about that.

0:49:22.1 AS: I mean he would... No political professional would've ever sent him out there to do these long rambling rallies, where he was in a very crude way doing with sentence fragments. It's not an argument, but doing kind like what I was describing Bill Clinton do. He'd sentence fragment his way to applause lines and figure out what, he's a smart person. And okay let's call out where he developed that skill. Where did Ronald Reagan develop his great skill? What made him so good? It's because he was one of the first politicians who was really in the '66 election who was able to understand the power of speech on film and the power of media. But he had also become a really good motivational speaker around the country and people sell him short, but he was really the first of that. And lest we forget and I think the Democrats really didn't understand this: I mean Donald Trump came in from reality TV, and he understood how to move people and move mass audiences in a way that other people didn't. And he put those skills to work just like Ronald Reagan did in the '60s and in the '80s. The way that people are just coming to understand.

0:50:50.3 CM: Dan Morain wrote about this, that you wrote a memo to the Hillary Clinton team when she was...

0:50:58.9 AS: Well that's when I was... Had a possibility of...

0:51:03.6 CM: ...Of being the campaign manager.

0:51:04.8 AS: Yeah.

0:51:06.6 CM: You told the candidate, she was well known by the American public but you're going to be expected to have a clear and deep rationale for your candidacy from the first day of your campaign. It's about a plan for the middle class.

0:51:23.9 AS: Yeah. I believe that to this day. I believe that I...

0:51:26.0 CM: Did she not listen to you or did she?

0:51:27.6 AS: Well, no. She went a different direction, and she hired very smart people to run her campaign. And it's too bad that they lost to Donald Trump. But I truly believe that in a larger sense one of the most unrecognized things in not just American politics but in politics around the world, is that you are increasingly having these major amounts of wealth concentrated in these coastal areas. And the folks in the middle of these countries are feeling increasingly dealt out, both politically socially and economically. And let's stipulate that there's a certain amount of the vote, a certain chunk of the vote that vote for George Wallace. Okay, or Father Coughlin, we'll go back in time. Okay. But that doesn't get you to 50% plus one. It's all those folks who voted for Barack Obama and then flipped to Donald Trump, And that was really because there's this growing inequality of wealth and there is growing sense in many parts of, not just this country but many countries, that people are just not included.

0:53:08.4 AS: And you can put it all on hatefulness and Trump-ness, but I think that's almost like a block part of the electorate. I think it's almost like a constant in the equation but there's another part of the electorate... And frankly, I don't think the Democratic Party is speaking to those folks with a populism. And I'm going to date myself, but maybe in the tradition of Roosevelt, a tradition of, say, Fred Harris, who was a populist. The tradition of who are the folks coming out of the '30s and '40s in the Mid-West.

0:53:56.8 CM: Just quick on the Hillary Clinton campaign: You talked about she needed this plan for the middle class; in the end, Donald Trump delivered that better...He went with an East Coast team ...

0:54:17.9 CM: Is California given the back hand by the East Coast?

0:54:30.6 AS: I don't think it's that so much... I mean let's also be real. It's kind of funny in this country, news tends to flow from the east to the west. It just does. And I don't know, you just have to go with what happens, and that's a reality. I also believe that the other reality is that a lot of the culturally interesting and disruptive things move from west to east so I'd much rather be in the West Coast. [laughter]

0:55:05.3 CM: Okay, alright, let's go to some of the West coast races that you've run. Kamala Harris versus Steve Cooley in the Attorney General's race in 2010. This was incredibly high stakes, because as it was portrayed in the media, Republicans wanted to stop Kamala Harris on her tracks, seeing a rising star in the Democratic Party. Give us your... Set the scene for us about

that race.

0:55:37.3 AS: Yeah. And as you may remember the San Francisco Chronicle actually reported that Steve Cooley beat us.

0:55:44.3 CM: Was my byline on that? [laughter]

0:55:51.1 AS: No, I don't believe so, but it was a modern a modern day Dewey Truman.

0:55:52.7 CM: Yes, yes.

0:55:53.3 AS: Okay so again, I really don't wanna take anything away from the candidate, because we are talking about a supremely talented charismatic person. So let's start there, because so much of successful candidate races start with really having an incredibly talented candidate. That was an interesting race in this sense: We go through a primary, we have to beat a person who perhaps spends, I think, three- or four-to-one in a huge field and march out of there, no money, against a Republican who's actually been stockpiling money. You'd have to check the record, I believe he outspends us by a million or \$2 million.

0:56:50.1 CM: Yeah, I think he did, that's right. I don't have it right in front of me.

0:56:52.1 AS: That race is one of the best illustrations of how in California you actually have to make some really high stake decisions, risky decisions, in order to win. So, that race we were running against the moderate Republican district Attorney of L.A...

0:57:13.6 CM: That's right, he was not a far right...

0:57:15.1 AS: ...who should have beat us. We don't have any debate with him and this is in the middle of... You probably remember all the scandals in all these small towns in...

0:57:27.4 CM: Oh, yes, yes. The true detective.

0:57:29.9 AS: Yes. So we get one debate with him and he gets asked this question about like, "Aren't you retired? Will you, essentially, will you double dip?" And he basically says, "I earned it. I'm done, damn right." That sort of thing. It was like literally a 30-second answer. You required no editing. And so this happens, and I'm like, "Oh my goodness ... And I talked the candidate into literally knowing that it's gonna cause a lot of trouble with a lot of supporters, that we just need to take all of our money in this campaign and put it on one spot where we're going to literally just show people his words. That's all we're gonna do, and literally let him speak for himself. And we did that.... Do I know this was the deciding factor of the race? Yes. Absolutely. Because, remember, with the early vote in California, vote comes in archeological layers. So, when the first vote comes in, that reflects what was happening 30 days before the election.

0:58:55.7 CM: Right.

0:58:55.8 AS: And the next thing and so on and so forth. And what happened is we... I don't think we were able to go up to that spot until maybe like two and a half weeks out. So what happens is in the early vote in LA we're losing, losing, losing like we should have been – and then it just flips. Like when you get to the archeological layer where this spot is running.

0:59:13.1 CM: Yes. And Willie Brown wrote that on that race that you put together one of the best get out the boat operations California's ever seen, LA's black and Latino communities.

0:59:26.5 AS: That was also huge, no question a huge part. And Kamala's headquarters down there spent huge amounts of time just doing stuff that... I'm not sure you can do it today, but it's a lot of retail politics. All over, those communities in L.A. also made a huge difference, no question.

0:59:50.1 CM: Yeah. So you're right. Election night, we were writing Cooley wins.

[laughter] (Picture on the wall of Chronicle story saying, "Cooley wins")

0:59:58.9 AS: The San Francisco Chronicle, that's the actual headline. Cooley... [laughter]

1:00:01.1 CM: I don't wanna remember that. Let's go, let's move on. [laughter]

1:00:12.7 CM: Another race, same era. Gavin Newsom's run for lieutenant governor. This was also viewed as sort of a matchup between the rising stars in this case. Abel Maldonado, the lieutenant governor appointed by Schwarzenegger, who was viewed as a rising star in the Republican party, a moderate Republican, and Gavin Newsom of course. And Newsom entered with some liabilities. He had run for governor, a lackluster kind of run, and pulled out.

1:00:45.2 AS: Actually, in the same race! In the same cycle!

1:00:48.2 CM: Yes, same cycle. So talk to us about this race and how you set it up from the beginning, and how you saw it against Abel Maldonado.

1:00:55.7 AS: Well again, here's also again not to sell the candidate short, a supremely talented individual.

1:01:05.0 CM: And I have to say I covered his gubernatorial campaign, he had been going around California doing town hall meetings all over the place. So he's very... He was seasoned in that respect.

1:01:14.6 AS: He wasn't gonna beat Jerry Brown. And I don't care what anyone says about it. He was not gonna to beat Jerry Brown in a Democratic primary in California, an incredibly popular Attorney General. If you were a Democratic voter, it was like, "Okay, we like Gavin Newsom but

why am I gonna essentially end Jerry Brown's career?" That was not gonna happen. And so he decided to run for lieutenant governor instead. And look, that was really just a case of more than anything just introducing him to the voters across the rest of the state as a person who really... When he was mayor, really did things based on the courage of his convictions, like what he did on gay marriage and many other things. And voters liked him and they liked his record.

1:02:15.2 CM: And was that a race that sort of illustrated where the Republican party was in California, or the future prospects for the Republican party? Because, as you said, Abel Maldonado was a moderate Republican who had helped Democrats pass budget. He had angered his own party on that.

1:02:35.6 AS: There's no question. Today, it's like mathematically impossible. I wouldn't say it was in those days, but it was edging towards that. It was becoming really difficult. But the divisions now are so deep that you can do the math on this.

1:03:38.5 CM: Did the outcome in that race show basically the future of the Republican party in California?

1:03:58.6 AS: Schwarzenegger was a little bit of an anomaly that people forget that. necessarily that he was a really moderate Republican. It was that he was able to be elected essentially by a small plurality in a crazy recall election.

1:04:19.7 CM: Yeah. Yeah.

1:04:20.6 AS: I'm not sure that flat out Arnold would've ever gotten through a real Republican primary in California.

1:04:29.4 CM: Yeah.

1:04:29.6 AS: From... Just from a dead start.

1:04:34.6 CM: Yeah. Yeah.

1:04:35.9 AS: Obviously once he became governor, he could. But I'm not sure he would've won a Republican primary in California.

1:04:38.7 CM: Oh, it's an interesting thought. Yeah. That's...

1:04:42.5 AS: That's someone who would run... He was right.

1:04:46.1 CM: Interesting thought and interesting about Maldonado too. Right after that race then you ran Ed Lee's campaign for mayor in San Francisco and that came with its challenges too mainly because Ed Lee started out with kind of a black mark. He had said he was never gonna run for the job.

1:05:09.4 AS: Yeah. First of all Ed Lee, bless his soul was one of the truly most decent people you could ever meet. He was a great mayor. And more than anything just a really decent human being. There's a lot of times people divide up in the categories of running to be something versus running to do something. And he was definitely in the running to do something. I always thought that whole thing about him saying he was gonna do something and then do something different was overblown because just think about it. All human beings change their minds. And the way politicians get into trouble is when they change their minds and they get all tricky and they try and justify it and they go down. And so very simply in his case it was just a matter of saying "You know what? I changed my mind".

1:06:16.1 CM: Yeah. And voters didn't like...

1:06:17.0 AS: Yeah. Because everyone changes their mind it's like... Things.

1:06:18.7 CM: Yeah. So that was that. I think the next big sort of earthquake was Barbara Boxer's decision to retire. Of course, you have two of your clients, Gavin Newsom and Kamala Harris. How did you hear about that decision and did you have to mediate with these two?

1:06:42.1 AS: You know what, that is one of the most overblown things I've heard about. I've heard about like a wood-paneled room in there where it was everything was decided.

1:06:54.4 CM: Yes, yes, indeed.

[overlapping conversation]

1:06:57.9 AS: You could've walked in there, there actually are no wood panels in that room. The truth is really that the two of them knew each other very well and they basically worked it out.

1:07:10.4 CM: Here in this office or where? [laughter]

1:07:12.8 AS: Oh. No. That's a lot stuff of legends and myths, but not true. And at the end of the day, he wanted to be Governor more than he wanted to be Senator. She wanted to be Senator ... Like I say, the good news was it was folks who knew each other well. They knew each other as young people before they even became in office. And so yeah, they were just two people working things out.

1:07:43.3 CM: Yeah. And of course she announced her decision to run within a week.

1:07:47.9 AS: Well, that was the key.

1:07:50.4 CM: Yeah. Talk a little bit about that.

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PART III

1:07:51.8 AS: One of the most powerful things you can do is if you're decisive early in these races and you roll up the money and the endorsements and everything else. I truly believe in that race if we'd fiddled around for another couple weeks, I think we would've had five candidates in that race. If you actually get early decisively, claim your territory and really and do all the things you need to do to consolidate your position early, it can ironically have a way bigger effect on your campaign than raising money and running ads and all the standard things that campaigns do.

1:08:47.0 CM: And in fact, she didn't face a Republican in that race. She faced Loretta Sanchez under the top two primary.

1:08:52.5 AS: Right.

1:08:55.2 CM: Is the top two primary a good thing for California from your point of view. Does it make your job tougher or a candidate's job or what?

1:09:04.3 AS: No, It's only how many?

1:09:07.0 CM: That was the first time?

1:09:07.7 AS: On a statewide level, how many, does it happen more than once? So anyway it really doesn't play out to be very different...

1:09:23.0 CM: Yeah.

1:09:23.6 AS: I think that there was all sorts of belief among the people who put it up that somehow or another it would make the independent or the decline to state voters or whatever we're calling them today...

1:09:40.1 CM: Yeah.

1:09:40.9 AS: ...A much greater power. And the answer is those voters don't do a very good job of turning out in primaries, anyway. So it doesn't, it really didn't have the intended impact.

1:09:52.2 CM: Yeah. And of course in that case Kamala Harris won that handily. Let's go to our Presidential campaign. And then we're gonna, I'm gonna talk about the Gavin Newsom. I was at Kamala's Presidential campaign kickoff in Oakland. That's gotta be one of the most impressive ones, [laughter] kickoffs. Just talk about a little bit about what was your strategy with that and then, as we know, a few months later it was no more.

1:10:26.3 AS: No. But that not be. Well I mean, let's just level set on running for President of

the United States. What President number are we on?

[laughter]

1:10:39.5 CM: 46. Yes.

1:10:40.0 AS: Okay.

1:10:40.6 CM: Yes.

1:10:42.0 AS: How many people have run for President? 46,000.

1:10:43.8 CM: Yeah. Yeah. [laughter]

1:10:44.7 AS: Okay. So something like that.

1:10:46.6 CM: Yes. Right.

1:10:48.4 AS: It's like running for President... A wise person once said, "If you think you have maybe a 20% chance, you should do it." It's like one of the most difficult things. And it's incredibly hard to do. So it's like she had a great start to the campaign that the rest of the country got to see who she was and got to see what she was all about and got to see her vision or her charisma. And it is just like any other primary race. Honestly one of the smartest things she did, unlike another candidate, Elizabeth Warren, she got out at the right time and guess what? She became Vice President of the United States. So I would call that quite a resounding success. And sometimes in politics you have to, and you touched on an example earlier, which is Gavin Newsom deciding not to run for Governor against Jerry Brown.

1:12:01.8 CM: Yeah.

1:12:02.0 AS: Instead running for Lieutenant Governor, sometimes the wisest political decision you can make is actually to realize when you're not being successful and get out. And again, Elizabeth Warren is the classic example of someone who stayed in and she was never gonna be Vice President of the United States.

1:12:23.5 CM: Yeah.

1:12:23.5 AS: Because she had proved her absolute lack of vote-getting power.

1:12:30.6 CM: Yeah, and as you know some of the stories out there suggested at the end of the campaign. One of the reasons for the failure was this sort of dual operation that she had East Coast and West Coast. That this undermined her message. I mean did...

1:12:49.0 AS: Ah, I mean, it's like anything. Like politics is a funny business. Again if you go read

that clip on Cooley beating Kamala Harris, we apparently ran one of the stupidest campaigns in the world.

[laughter]

1:13:05.7 AS: It's like, what always happens in politics is like anything else in life. If you're successful, everything is brilliant and if you lose, everything is flawed and messed up. But the truth is usually that every campaign has flaws and...

1:13:23.3 AS: Imperfections and doesn't run smoothly.

1:13:26.9 CM: Yeah.

1:13:27.1 AS: That's win or lose. And they just get highlighted more if you lose.

1:13:32.3 CM: And you know, as you're looking now, and there's a lot of stories about Kamala Harris as a potential presidential candidate or the Democrats, some Democrats being worried about her, from what you know her as a candidate better than just about anybody. What are her strengths, but, you know, what are some of the things that are pushing some of these stories in terms of.

1:13:57.7 AS: I think that's just, I mean, go back and again, historically look at vice presidents, they all, you know, they just, it is a rough job to have. I mean and you are always, I think that she's really gathering steam and strength and has a good operation, and is gonna come out just fine.

1:14:23.1 CM: And the one criticism that you just hear constantly, overly cautious, that that's one of the issues that Democrats are worried about and voters have been worried about.

1:14:35.9 AS: I think that's a beltway thing.

1:14:37.4 AS: You don't, you don't think that?

1:14:42.6 CM: I don't.

1:14:42.7 AS: That does...

1:14:43.1 AS: I think she's doing a great job now, and I think she's, again, supremely talented. And I think I can think of many, many people who were dismissed and shoved, you know, shoved at the side of the road who emerged again, we talked about Gavin Newsom. The...

1:15:12.3 CM: Yeah.

1:15:12.8 AS: You know.

1:15:13.5 CM: Yeah.

1:15:13.9 AS: ... Quixotic run for governor.

1:15:16.5 CM: Yeah.

1:15:16.9 AS: As a matter of fact, it's kind of funny. I always think back there was this obscure little book written by -- I dunno if you remember this guy -- George Murphy.

1:15:30.2 CM: Yes.

1:15:30.6 AS: Who was the senator from California. He was beat by Tunney, but so he writes a (book) and I'm probably one of like 10 people in the world who's read it, but wrote basically like his autobiography. But the most interesting thing in the whole book is, as you know, he came up through vaudeville and through Hollywood.

1:15:54.1 CM: Right.

1:15:54.8 AS: And he recounts as a young man going to this vaudeville act of this juggler. And he went to see numerous times, one of the biggest hits on vaudeville. And he would watch this man flub this particular part in the routine early on in every act. And he finally went backstage, and he was like, "What is the matter with you? Why, you're like the best juggler in the world. Why can't you just spend more time perfecting that early part of your act where you drop the ball?" He said, young man, you don't understand. I can do that flawlessly, I do that on purpose. Because you'll never get people behind you unless you show them that you have flaws and that you're wounded.

1:16:35.1 CM: Ah. Okay.

1:16:35.9 AS: And that you can err: Sometimes a little bit of sores along the way is good.

1:16:44.2 CM: Okay.

1:16:44.2 AS: It makes you way more human.

1:16:46.3 CM: Okay. Let's go to Gavin Newsom. You worked with him in 2018. He was elected governor in a landslide over John Cox.

1:16:55.1 AS: Yep.

1:16:56.1 CM: And of course, we saw John Cox come back again in the 2021 recall. Talk a little bit about that recall. So unusual, did, what's the... French laundry, Was that the reason or, what, how did that happen? How did the recall happen in your view? And, what about those

who say, based on California's system, the system here in California, it's going to happen again. It's just a matter of time.

1:17:29.8 AS: It may, I think the, but let's also remember the extraordinary circumstances. There was a court that erred in allowing a major extension for collecting signatures. So let's not forget that.

1:17:46.1 CM: Right.

1:17:46.9 AS: They literally changed the rules. And then the other thing too, and listen, I would say they, the other side did a brilliant job on that. What they, they realized that if they mailed into Trump-heavy precincts that people would return them. And you know, and they found a way to tap into that, kind of like post-Trump lost anger, you know? And also the reality of politics in America is we talk about, it's incredibly divisive right now. And, if you can go tap into that, I think you could, you know, they had enough time, they had an extension of time, and they were able to tap into these Trump voters. Now, as we talked about in California, does that add up to 50% plus one? No. Does that add up to potentially the number of signatures you need for a recall? Yeah.

1:18:47.7 CM: Was it ever as close as the IGS poll suggested?

1:18:51.4 AS: No.

1:18:51.6 CM: But did the IGS poll help you? It showed it almost.

1:18:54.5 AS: IGS polls.

1:18:54.9 CM: A dead heat.

1:18:55.7 AS: Well, again, you know, back to my George Murphy [laughter], you know, showing, sometimes showing some weakness and a few flaws is greatly beneficial. In that case, artificial, but...

1:19:10.1 CM: Did that wake up Democrats or...?

1:19:12.4 AS: Yes, it truly did. It woke up Democrats. It was truly because look, we knew the actual state of things. And so it wasn't like that poll was gonna throw us into a tail spin.

1:19:32.2 CM: But it threw a lot of Democratic activists out there.

1:19:34.6 AS: Yeah. It got people's attention and...

1:19:36.8 CM: Lit a fire.

1:19:36.9 AS: And thank goodness. And it did.

1:19:37.3 CM: That lit a fire under them. And what about Larry Elder's entry into that race?

1:19:40.9 AS: Oh, God bless Larry Elder.

1:19:45.3 CM: You wanna invite him back for future...

1:19:47.3 AS: Yeah. No, well, he didn't invite himself back. He was, I guess he had enough of the...

1:19:51.4 CM: Well, what purpose did he serve for you, for you guys?

1:19:54.7 AS: Well, he was just, I mean, at the end of the day, in...

1:19:57.4 CM: And Caitlyn Jenner for that matter.

1:20:00.0 AS: The biggest mistake ... Gray Davis made it, for that matter -- is let the recall become a referendum on you. If you allow a recall to become a referendum on you, and you are unpopular, you have a very good chance of losing. If you can make a recall into a choice ... Pollsters ask, I think, a really dumb question a lot of times. They'll ask, "Would you vote to re-elect this person without providing an alternative? And human beings being human beings will be like, "Well, maybe I'd like Oprah would be better," or name Barack Obama would come to California and run for governor, you know? Right. ... But that's what happens when you end up in a recall situation, where it's a referendum on yourself. That's just you running against yourself in theory.

1:21:17.8 CM: Right.

1:21:18.3 AS: But that's not the way the world works. The world is made up of choices. If you fire Gavin Newsom, here's who you're gonna end up with, okay? Your choice, folks. And I don't think the voters were looking forward to Larry Elder.

1:21:32.3 CM: Yeah, can you just talk about Gavin's, somebody you've worked with for so many years, his strengths and some of the challenges of working with him?

1:21:42.8 AS: Yeah. I mean, his look, his number one strength is that again in the categories of people running to be something versus running to do something. He is absolutely in the camp of running to do something, he always has been, you look at what he's done over his career, taking very incredibly courageous and taking lots of shit from people. He took a lot of shit from people from the Democratic party over his gay marriage (position) as mayor ... He was a leader on healthcare, on all kinds of things way before other people were doing it because, again, he's someone motivated not by being something, but by doing something. If you look at one of the first things he did as governor of California, it's not necessarily incredibly popular: He essentially

he put a moratorium on the death penalty.

1:22:31.5 CM: That's right.

1:22:32.0 AS: You know, it's funny and I think that voters will be a lot kinder or a lot kinder to people who, even if they don't agree with you, they think you stand for something, you're doing something based upon a vision versus someone who's just has their finger to the wind and trying to figure out what they should do to be more popular.

1:22:52.9 CM: And in recent months, he's been a very strong voice for Democrats to get out there and really take it to the Republicans. He's doing it, yeah, on a regular basis with Florida Governor Ron DeSantis and Greg Abbott in Texas, is that a good strategy ?

1:23:12.9 AS: Absolutely. Again, let's not be afraid to take people on and his point about those things, and he makes the point way more articulately than I ever can. But his larger point is why are we letting them take these words like freedom and own the franchise on them? Like, okay if you think freedom is not being able to read books in your library based upon some like quasi-fascist idiot making the decision or right of choice over your own body. Yeah. If you think that's freedom you got another thing coming to you.

1:23:54.1 CM: What do you think, what's his strategy you think in? I mean even his wife, ex-wife, Kimberly Gilfoyle recently said he's always wanted to be president.

1:24:04.3 AS: Oh, but that's not what motivates him.

1:24:09.0 CM: What does?

1:24:11.2 AS: Again, doing things not being, not being something, but doing something. And I think he just felt like there was a real, like no one was doing that.

1:24:21.0 CM: That definitely sounds like something to watch, but I wanna get down to, we're running out of time.

1:24:33.0 CM: Okay. Caruso/Bass, of course. This was a massive and massively dramatic race, you took some heat from other Democrats. How could he work with Rick Caruso? Garry South, though [laughter] was quoted as saying, I could never, not in good conscience. What did you say to Democrats who said that to you?

1:25:00.7 AS: Says the guy who was on the payroll of the Chamber of Commerce, give me a break.

[laughter]

1:25:05.9 CM: What...

1:25:06.4 AS: The back in the day. But it's easy to throw rocks at other people. Rick Caruso was a ... I had actually known him from long time ago. He's a serious person who has served on a number of major commissions doing major work in LA and that's where I first got to know him, and I thought he would, and still believe, he would be a really great mayor of that city, understands how it works, has deep knowledge, has been a outstanding, truly outstanding philanthropist in many neighborhoods that need help. You know? So, yeah. I bumped my head around on that one.

1:26:07.4 CM: And the challenge was big in the sense of Karen Bass, well known, somebody who had also been considered for VP. What did you see going into that in terms of her biggest weaknesses, and what were... As you said, Caruso heavily talked about some of the sort of bread-and-butter issues that mattered to Angelinos' homelessness being one of them?

1:26:39.2 AS: Yeah. If there was a path to win the race ... there was a real sense in Los Angeles, and I think there's a lot of truth to it, that nada was being done to address the homeless crisis.

1:26:56.4 CM: Yeah.

1:26:56.8 AS: And that there were massive resources being spent and not being spent very effectively. And yeah, we were in on that. .. In some sense, it's pretty risky because if you get elected, you actually better deliver on that pretty dramatically or you're not ever gonna get re-elected. You're very unpopular very quickly.

1:27:23.6 CM: And you talked about how one of the biggest jobs is spending money and spending well. Obviously, Rick Caruso had money and could spend... That's one thing you did not lack in that race. The ad campaign, et cetera, In the end, did that in some way work against him or no? What do you think was the deciding factor in terms of how it came out?

1:27:50.2 AS: I think it's hard to know exactly what the deciding factor is, but I can tell you this: The electorate was different in the general election compositionally than it was in the election four years earlier, There was 50 percent turnout in the previous election, which was as you know was a governor's race. And then this was I think 43 percent. And it was honestly, it was like a huge fall off in the decline-to-state voters and a lot of voters that probably would've made our margin. And I have a lot of theories on why that happened, but who really knows?

1:28:48.0 CM: That may show that California voters or Democratic voters are just never going to accept somebody who ever had an R in their name?

1:29:00.3 AS: I don't think so. I don't think so. I think there's a chunk of Democratic voters who we were never gonna get anyway that probably believe that, but I think there were tons of people who felt perhaps that wasn't a good thing.

1:29:25.5 CM: Yeah. But another area where I think your team has really established a sort of

reputation is on initiatives, major initiatives in California. When you go back to Prop 30 with Jerry Brown, overcoming the odds to raise taxes [laughter] on the highest earners to increase funding for California schools, that was one of them. You've done the soda tax, you've done sports betting, some of the biggest things facing California voters. Talk about the initiative process from that aspect of it, and is it working? Does it need to be revised in some way, reformed? And of the initiatives that you've worked on, what do you think have been the most consequential for California?

1:30:15.9 AS: You know what? I mean, it's easy to, again, throw rocks at the initiative process. And clearly, it has flaws, and as you know, has its origin in the Hiram Johnson reforms, just like the recall. But I would also just ask a very simple question. It's easy to talk about the negatives. But the most significant criminal justice reform was done in California, was done before that term ever got floated around. And there were Prop 36 and Prop 47, both done by the initiative process. One reforming the three-strikes law, which was just an abomination where people were getting put in prison for stealing pizzas 'cause they were unlucky enough to frankly have done it in a rural area. And then, Prop 47, which I know gets some criticism...

1:31:13.9 CM: Right, right.

1:31:14.4 AS: But really, for the first time took a lot of things out of the felony column that should've never been there to begin with. And let's also be real about what our state prisons and our county jails are. I mean, among other things, they've become the largest repository of the mentally ill and addicted anywhere in the world. That's what they've become. I mean, let's be real. But would any meaningful reform have happened without the initiative process? Absolutely not. So you have to look at the benefits, as well, as there some times when the process gets abused. But that's like all processes. And if you believe that you can perfect processes so that they're un-flawed, you'll probably make them worse.

1:32:19.7 CM: Yeah. Okay. As we mentioned in the beginning, your team has represented just who's who of California Democrats. We've got a little time, so I'd like to get your sort of short thoughts on some of the folks who...

1:32:39.3 AS: Is this your lightning round?

1:32:40.0 CM: Yeah, yeah. Lightning round, kind of. Alex Padilla, just give us your...

1:32:45.9 AS: Oh, Alex Padilla...

1:32:46.6 CM: Yeah, U.S. Senator.

1:32:49.6 AS: Honestly, like truly one of the incredibly brilliant, charismatic people, again, in it for the right reasons. And I think there's no... Who knows how far he will go?

1:33:05.6 CM: Xavier Becerra.

1:33:10.4 AS: Xavier is... We'll see what happens. He's in D.C. and really struggling, but he did... He was a phenomenal attorney general in California. Again, someone with a very bright future.

1:33:25.9 CM: What about Tony Thurmond?

1:33:27.6 AS: Oh, love Tony Thurmond. It's too bad that he holds an office that isn't paid enough attention to and doesn't get reported on, because the things he did especially during the pandemic, getting computers into the hands of children who otherwise previously didn't have access, and really the heroic things he did should be told.

1:34:07.5 CM: Eleni Kounalakis, lieutenant governor.

1:34:12.7 AS: Lieutenant governor, again, a lot of people don't know her story and it'll be interesting to see how it unfolds. But again, huge advocate. As you know, the lieutenant governor serves on all the higher education boards and there's a really wonderful record to talk about of what she's done in those areas, and also a great environmental record. But also, she's an interesting person and she won't get credit for this, but she has, as you know, a background as an ambassador.

1:34:47.8 CM: Yes, right. To Hungary, right.

1:34:48.7 AS: And so, yeah, she's also been really like the economic ambassador of California for the last four years and has done remarkable things.

1:35:01.3 CM: She's indicated an interest in running for governor. Anything you wanna tell us there? [chuckle]

1:35:06.8 AS: No. Stay tuned. We'll see. Who knows?

1:35:10.5 CM: And you got a button here for Lateefah Simon.

1:35:13.7 AS: Lateefah Simon.

1:35:14.7 CM: What can you... What do you wanna tell us about her?

1:35:18.2 AS: Lateefah Simon is just an extraordinary human being. She serves on the BART Board right now, but I first got to know her when she was running Kamala Harris' "Back on Track." We now, again... Like Prop 36, happened in the days before we used these words, "criminal justice," which was the program for getting young first offenders, a lot of women, out of the criminal justice system, into jobs. And actually, hey, guess what? Having the correction system actually have some correcting in it. Correcting people's courses. And honestly, one of the most effective... That's where I first met her, really, people in terms of helping other people turn around their lives and then just...

1:36:10.8 CM: And she's now filed to run for BART Board this year?

1:36:13.8 AS: She probably will.

1:36:14.8 CM: Yes.

1:36:15.2 AS: And she, right now as you know, she serves on the BART Board. She's legally blind and has been a huge advocate for expanding the services.

1:36:26.3 CM: Yeah, no, she's... When we talk about this roster of clients that you have that are... There's many more who are here in California, who are leading Democrats. I was discussing those... You epitomize the role of political consultant has changed from when you first got into this business to now. I mentioned the word, consigliere. You're more than just coming up with numbers, correct? Can you just talk a little bit about how this job has changed from a couple of decades ago to now? You're required to be sort of all things to a candidate, or was that always the way it was?

1:37:10.0 AS: I always believe it's the way it should be... It's different, but it's maybe a little bit like a lawyer representing a client in a case. But in this case, it's not something that's truncated as a legal case. And it's your job to be really their advocate, too ... Truly, one of the lessons I learned early on was when I started in this business, I was of the belief that it was your job as a... If you were helping advance candidates to, you wanted to turn everyone into Jack Kennedy, or some sort of a version of the perfect... You remember all the Robert Redford movies, right?

1:38:05.8 CM: Right.

1:38:07.7 AS: You wanted to turn them into "the candidate." And then you get along enough and actually you realize that that's actually not the job. The job is to understand fully your candidate's strengths and weaknesses and do everything you can to advance them with their strengths and have those be their best foot forward all the time. And that's considerably different ... And what makes it so interesting is it's always different for each person. And you just have to find out, what makes them tick? what makes them good? what excites people about them? what excites themselves about what they do? I hate to use the word because it's so overused at this point, but "authentic."

1:39:06.0 CM: But in this day and age, is that harder? That authenticity, is it harder to communicate? As we said in the beginning, are candidates more worried about YouTube moments and viral moments?

1:39:22.8 AS: Oh, I don't... Didn't Donald Trump prove that you could? If anything, I think the opposite is true. If anything, I think that, yeah, there was a moment in time when ... but I actually think that if anything, ironically, so much has happened and so many things have happened...

1:39:54.8 CM: So has Donald Trump changed the whole landscape in some respect?

1:40:00.4 AS: I'm not sure that Donald Trump did it so much as he was the right person at the right time to walk into this world that had changed.

1:40:13.1 CM: That the world itself has changed... Yeah, changed.

1:40:14.6 AS: The world itself had changed and he was really the vehicle and really the first person on a large level to understand that. And so it's like, are the gotcha moments gonna disintegrate you anymore? It'd have to be pretty darn ... So I think there's actually people probably, if anything, less leery about that.

1:40:34.6 CM: When you look back at all the campaigns you've done, is there a moment of which you're most proud of? There's probably more than one, but a campaign or a moment... What?

1:40:48.7 AS: Yeah, I would say the moment I was most proud of was being involved in my father's race for the district attorney in 1979 and seeing him win, and seeing him, again, someone running to do something, not to be something and to really get to use all the skills and knowledge he had accumulated over decades in the Attorney General's office to make the DA's office a much better place.

1:41:18.5 CM: And is there a moment that you regret, or say, "I wish we had done this differently"?

1:41:24.9 AS: Well, there's always moments like that. I don't know, I can't think of one in particular, but if you can't understand when you've made a mistake and reflect upon it and then improve on it, you'll never be successful.

1:41:45.1 CM: What do you think is the future of this work, given the no holds barred? You've got the Marjorie Taylor Greenes out there and Matt Gaetz, candidates who have changed the landscape entirely of political discourse and so forth. Does that make your job harder? And what's the landscape gonna look like with those kind of candidates now in office?

1:42:14.8 AS: You know, we like to think things have changed way more than they've changed. You can find characters like that, you know what I mean? Lyndon Johnson talking about James Eastland, the Senator from Mississippi, said that if there was a flood in Mississippi, he would be in the middle of the river, blaming either the blacks or the communists. I don't think things have changed as much as we all think they have.

1:43:00.4 CM: So, what inspires you still to...

1:43:01.6 AS: People like Kamala Harris and Gavin Newsom, people who are actually in it for

the right reason and are willing to be courageous in the decisions they make, and not just make them based upon political expediency.

1:43:19.3 CM: And so do you think that California being a one-party state is a good thing then? I mean, you represent so many Democrats. Is this a good thing for the voters?

1:43:31.5 AS: Well, I don't know. Would you rather have Gavin Newsom or George Deukmejian as your governor?

1:43:44.8 CM: [chuckle] Yeah, you're saying that the campaigns, the candidates...

1:43:51.6 AS: Or, would you rather have Pete Wilson or Jerry Brown? I don't know. [chuckle] I think the results are pretty good. I think we've had some pretty damn good governors and other elected officials.

1:44:04.3 CM: Yeah, I would be remiss if I didn't ask you, too, about, you're not all about politics. Your family has also established a very important non-profit, Beyond Differences. We mentioned your daughter, Lily, your late daughter, Lily, who I knew, many of us knew as really a force in your campaigns. Can you just... That's another aspect of your career, I think, that's been important and valuable.

1:44:30.6 AS: Yeah, I'm gonna say real honestly, that the person... I've been a, I think, a helpful assistant, but the person who's really been the driving force has been my wife, Laura Thomas.

1:44:41.1 CM: Yes, yes.

1:44:42.8 AS: And to her, is the credit. And we just had... We do a national event called, No One Eats Alone Day, and we actually just had it last Friday. Over 2,000 schools across America participated, which is a nice, hefty percentage of the middle schools in America. I think there's 13,000. I was just watching something good come out of that, it's a great thing.

1:45:17.1 CM: Yeah. Well, Ace Smith, thank you so much for your time...

1:45:17.8 AS: Thank you.

1:45:36.0 CM: Thanks very much for being with us. I'm Carla Marinucci. We're here for Capital Weekly, for this program funded by the California State Libraries. Thank you, Ace Smith, for your thoughts today.

1:45:49.0 AS: Thank you.