



ATTORNEY SEARCH

*By Stephen E. Seckler*

## **Bush v. Gore: Career Lessons from Campaign 2000**

The twists and turns in this year's presidential race were enough to make anyone's head spin.

If you are glad that the post-election battles are over and relieved that you will stop hearing non-stop election coverage on the news, consider this: You can learn a lot about managing your career by reviewing the ups and downs of the campaign.

While Al Gore and George W. Bush both demonstrated behavior that is hardly worth emulating, there may actually be some positive lessons to be learned as well.

- **Mentors are critical.**

No matter what you think of George W. Bush, you have to give him credit for finding great mentors. Their guidance was critical in getting Bush to the top despite his limited experience.

National figures with significant Washington credentials (Dick Cheney, James Baker, et al.) and Bush's inner circle of Texas Republicans (including Donald Evans, an oilman who chaired his campaign and spearheaded Bush's remarkable fundraising effort) gave Bush valuable political advice.

They went to bat for him and they helped him to build the skills he needed to run a competitive campaign. Without the guidance and support of these avuncular advisors, Bush could never have come as far as he has.

It is an important career lesson for all of us to follow. A professional career cannot be built solo. You need guidance from senior lawyers who can help you avoid serious career mistakes.

In law school, if a professor sat next to you during an exam and coached you, everyone would accuse you of cheating. As a practicing lawyer, on the other hand, getting help from your superiors is called being resourceful; and it is critical if you want to continue to advance at your firm or in your legal career outside of the firm.

- **Don't shy away from self-promotion.**

Many of us were taught that it is in bad taste to tell others about our accomplishments. But we can all learn something from politicians like Gore and Bush, who were shameless in taking full credit for their accomplishments. It is important, however, not to take credit when it is not warranted (both candidates were guilty of this).

If you achieve a good result in a difficult pro bono case, let your colleagues know. With proper approval from your firm, contact the media when you have an interesting case to report. If a client gives you a glowing verbal thank you because he or she is pleased with the way you handled a transaction, let the partner in charge know.

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You need to educate others about your successes (they'll probably hear about your failures without your help). As long as you are a good listener, as long as you do not talk about yourself all the time and as long as you help others rejoice in their successes, no one will fault you for celebrating your own victories.

- **Actions speak louder than words.**

If George W. Bush really wanted to demonstrate that he likes to work in a bipartisan fashion, he should have called a summit meeting with Al Gore to resolve the election debacle shortly after Nov. 7.

Instead, his actions defied his words. It was all-out war between the Republicans and Democrats between Election Day and the day he delivered his acceptance speech.

Bush now has another chance to show through his actions that he can truly be a bipartisan president (though asking a Democratic senator to join his cabinet when the senator's replacement is likely to be a Republican hardly makes the case).

Similarly, as a lawyer, you cannot rely on your words alone to make good impressions on your superiors and on your clients. Promises and reassurances that you will "deliver" do not mean anything if you consistently miss deadlines, if you seem unwilling to take on new assignments and if you do not answer phone messages in a timely fashion.

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- **Keeping small promises builds trust; fabricating details breeds mistrust.**

During the campaign, Al Gore demonstrated a particular talent for destroying trust. Through a long list of seemingly innocuous exaggerations (most of which were based on some underlying and laudable truth), the public began to consider him untrustworthy.

His claims about his role in developing the Internet and in uncovering the situation at Love Canal, an environmentally contaminated community in upstate New York, are two examples.

In fact, Al Gore did play a large role in supporting funding for the development of the Internet and he can legitimately claim credit for holding the first congressional hearings on Love Canal during the 1970s.

Most of us look for small ways to measure a candidate's integrity (since it takes a lot more work to review a candidate's record).

In the same way, if you are an attorney, you are more likely to be judged in the way that you keep the small promises that you make (versus the quality of the work you produce).

For the most part, clients have no other way to measure your efforts, because by definition you are the expert they are paying to give them the right answers.

If you tell a client that you will call at a particular time, make sure that you make that phone call or have a secretary explain why you have not. If you promise a partner you will have a memo completed by a certain time, make sure you meet that deadline (or do not make the promise).

Although two or three typos may seem like an inconsequential rate of error, if a partner sees those errors, she will question the thoroughness of the rest of your work.

**Don't be a know-it-all.** It was clear to many Massachusetts residents in watching the presidential debates that Al Gore had a far superior command of the issues than George Bush. But by being so insistent that he was "right," he turned off a lot of voters.

People did not want to vote for him because they did not like him. If he had been more deferential to Bush as he did while giving his concession speech, he might be the president-elect right now.

As lawyers, we need to be careful not to project arrogance to support staff, paralegals, fellow associates, partners,

judges or clients. Confidence is a desirable trait, but insisting that you are right when there is nothing important at stake is counterproductive.

Listen carefully to the concerns and analysis of a partner, associate or client and acknowledge what he or she is saying. If you disagree, decide if the issue is important enough for you to persist. Otherwise, move on to something more important.

**Don't be afraid to acknowledge your weaknesses and mistakes.** In trying to win the public opinion debate about the outcome of the 2000 election, supporters of the vice president and the Texas governor were adamant in their positions.

But both camps lost credibility by failing to acknowledge the legitimacy of the other party's concerns. Bush supporters kept insisting, *inter alia*, that all of the votes had been counted in Florida. A more credible position would have been to first acknowledge that, in fact, ballots had not been counted because they could not be read by the machines (i.e., before providing compelling reasons why the hand-recount should be stopped anyway).

Late in the campaign, Bush acknowledged that he had been convicted of drunk driving; but the admission came only after it was revealed by a third party.

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As a lawyer, it is important to validate legitimate points made by opposing counsel in a deal or in a controversy. If you do not, then your own valid arguments are likely to be discounted.

In a similar vein, if you miss a deadline, give an improper citation or make a professional error in judgment, own up to it as soon as possible. Sweeping it under the rug will only cause more problems later.

There are many lessons we can learn from politicians about being an effective professional. After all, most politicians are continuously trying to advance their careers to the next level.

But as we can learn from this year's election, there are good ways and bad ways to ensure that your career progresses in the direction you want it to go.