

Allen Raymond. *Confessions of a Republican Operative: How to Rig an Election*. (Simon & Schuster, 2008), pp. 256. \$ 12.00. ISBN-13: 978-1-4165-5222-2

**Republican Campaign Consultant Allen Raymond** stood before the court and was asked by the judge: “What about a moral compass?” Raymond had just been given a three-month felony sentence for his role in harassing voters by jamming phones across state lines in the highly publicized 2002 New Hampshire Senate election “phone jamming scandal,” despite having consulted with a GOP elections lawyer who had cleared the tactic as legal. As Raymond related in *Confessions of a Republican Operative* (2008), in 2002 “just about every Republican operative was so dizzy with power that if you find two of us who could still tell the difference between politics and crime, you could probably have rubbed us together for fire as well” (p. 1).

At the trial, Raymond testified that he was paid by Republican operatives to call white households asking them to vote for Democratic candidate Jean Shaheen, using the voice of a “ghetto black guy.” He also testified that he made similar calls to union households speaking with a heavy Hispanic accent to suppress the vote.

Raymond’s narrative describes his slow ascent and rapid descent on the GOP side of elections management. His participation in campaigns ranged from the ill-fated presidential campaigns of Steve Forbes to the more successful House campaigns of Representative William Martini. However, Raymond believed that he was designated by superiors to be a fall-guy when the New Hampshire telephone jamming scandal broke. Not surprisingly, when the Department of Justice knocked on his door, he decided to cooperate: “Why wouldn’t I have cooperated? After all, when the shit hit the fan, my political party and my former colleagues

not only threw me under the bus but then blamed me for getting run over” (p. 3).

Raymond’s motivations were not purely related to revenge, however. Not only did the Republican’s turn on him, party divisions began to surface in his consciousness. Raymond, who aligned with the northeastern Republicans and worked for Representative Martini, had become highly critical of Speaker Newt Gingrich’s strong-armed approach to House governance. Raymond was disappointed and resentful when Gingrich and his followers used the “Contract with America” to claim credit for the Republican’s historic takeover of the House of Representatives after forty years of Democratic control. Raymond said that the Republican leadership had nothing to do with this hard-fought win in New Jersey: “In fact their pro-life, snake-handling babble could have easily cost us the election, but if you tried to tell that to Newt and his followers they’d march on your office bearing pitchforks and torches. Their special brand of religious doggerel might go over in Oklahoma, but try selling the stuff to a bunch of Springsteen fans in Asbury Park” (p. 87). Confessions of a Republican Operative equates Gingrich’s iron-fisted political tactics and religious zeal with Nixon’s infamous “Southern Strategy,” which was originally utilized to appeal to southern and disaffected lower income voters by focusing on issues such as state’s rights and busing.<sup>1</sup> Recently, Republicans’ “conservative values” appeal with cultural issues such as “gay marriage,” abortion, and religion in order to mobilize their base.

Raymond’s prescriptions for what is wrong with the current GOP actually focuses primarily on fiscal rather than religious issues. Contrary to Raymond’s findings, especially if Gingrich’s “Contract with America” was any guide, his 10 major proposals—i.e., from the Fiscal Responsibility Act to the Job Creation and Wage Enhancement Act – were actually fiscally inclined, not religious.<sup>2</sup> In this sense, Raymond’s narrative echoes in a Republican key the themes of Thomas Frank’s *What’s the Matter with Kansas*, which suggested that the Republican alliance of fiscal and social conservatives worked to the economic disadvantage of many religious voters, who were instrumental in bringing the GOP to power in the 1990’s. Raymond, much like Frank, identify the same culprits in people like Gingrich, who both accuse of cynically manipulating religious resentments as a way to securing votes.

Certainly, Republicans are not the only ones to succumb to the

temptations of political corruption. Here in Oklahoma, the long history of Democratic dominance has produced notable instances of corruption, including former Governor David Hall, who served a 3-year prison stint for racketeering and extortion, and former Governor David Walter's conviction on misdemeanor violation of election laws. More notoriously, former Democrat State Senator Gene Stipe is often most synonymous with corruption when the Democrats ran the show in the Oklahoma legislature; however, Republicans are now calling the shots.

Oklahoma Republicans do not appear to have learned the right lessons of Democrats' failings. Former OK House Speaker Lance Cargill, for example, was forced to resign last year for his failure to pay state taxes and questionable management of a political action committee he formed in 2006. Given both parties' ethical failings, it appears that Lord Acton's Dictum – power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely – should be upper-most in Oklahoma voters' minds as they choose their representatives.<sup>3</sup>

While Raymond's book may be dismissed by some as mere payback, another important theme is his search for redemption, which is an important part of his conclusion. After he was sentenced, his wife broke down, sobbing, and he attempted to console her. After his sentence was handed down to him, he told his wife who was sobbing, "I can do this. We can do this. It's three months low security, it's nothing. I've been away on campaigns longer than that. We can do this. So, I did it. After ten full years inside the GOP, ninety days among honest criminals wasn't really any great ordeal." It may be an open question as to whether he received his just deserts for his actions and whether Congress will crack down on these practices.<sup>4</sup>

*How to Rig an Election* is a quick and enjoyable read, giving insight, particularly from a political operative behind party lines. Such a book might be useful for a supplementary text on the ethics, or disregard for them, in the practice of political campaigning.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> *Branch, Taylor. 1999. Pillar of Fire: America in the King Years 1963-65. New York: Simon & Schuster.*

<sup>2</sup> The Republican Contract With America. <http://www.house.gov/house/Contract/CONTRACT.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Ethics Commission Publicly Reprimands Representative Lance Cargill, The Republican State House Committee and the Oklahoma County Republican Committee for multiple Ethics Rules Violations. <http://www.ok.gov/oec/documents/PR-IV-2007-008.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> Cohen, Adam. 2008. "A Tale of Political Dirty Tricks Makes the Case for Election Reform." *New York Times*. January 1. <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/01/01/opinion/01tue3.html>.