

FOR FIVE DECADES, KARL ROVE HAS BEEN active in American politics, guiding hundreds of candidates to victory and in the process revolutionizing the art of political campaigning. Mr. Rove rose to national prominence after orchestrating then-Governor George W. Bush's successful presidential election campaign in 2000, and later serving as Senior Advisor and Deputy Chief of Staff in the White House. Vanity Fair called Mr. Rove "one of the most powerful unelected officials in the United States." President Bush referred to him as "The Architect."

Writing for The Wall Street Journal and making regular appearances on TV, Mr. Rove remains an influential commentator on American politics—and through his work with political action committees, he also remains an influential participant.

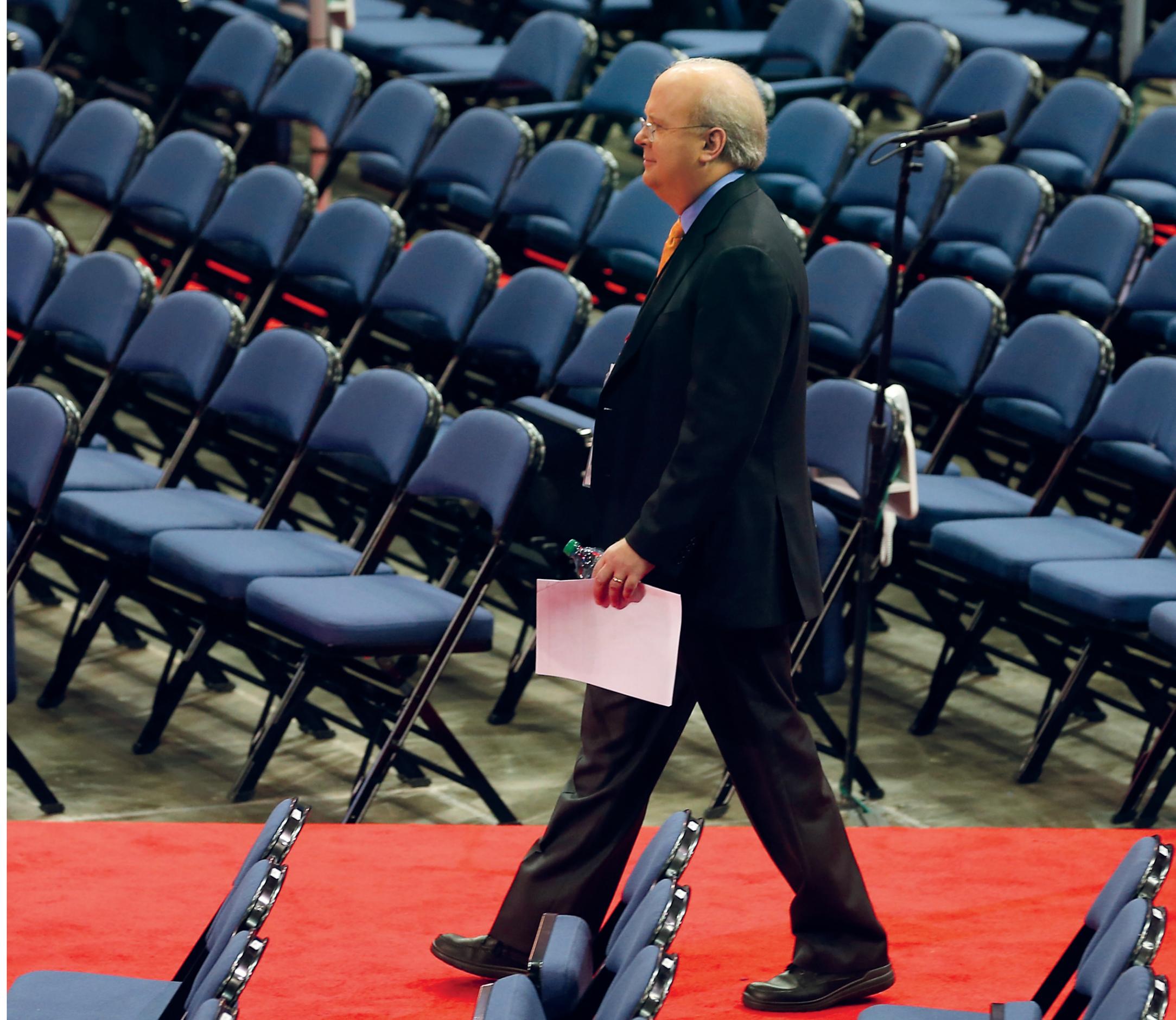
In a recent conversation with Brunswick's Raul Damas, Mr. Rove shared that he is now at work on his third book, which will look at presidential decision-making. He also discussed what he learned from President Bush's leadership, and explained how history can help temper our tendency to hyperbolize.

You published your memoir, *Courage and Consequence*, in 2010. If you were to write it today, what would you change?

I'd be reluctant to change anything, because what I was trying to do was draw back the curtain and give

The legendary political strategist and campaign architect speaks with Brunswick's **RAUL DAMAS.**

KARL ROVE



people an insight into what we knew [in the White House] and the decisions we made based on the imperfect, limited knowledge available at that time. I'm writing a book on presidential decision-making, and one of the key lessons is that presidents make decisions with much less information than we assume they have.

History always provides more information and insights in retrospect. I'd leave the book as it was.

David McCullough said studying history is "an antidote to a lot of unfortunate human trends like self-importance and self-pity." Would you agree? Has your own love of history enabled a particular perspective you find helpful in this moment?

David is absolutely right. History is an antidote for either believing that we are bigger and better than we are, or the opposite of that—that we are in worse shape than we are. When I was writing my McKinley volume [*The Triumph of William McKinley*, 2015], I had to understand the Gilded Age. And the more I looked at the Gilded Age, the worse it looked. You have five presidential elections in a row in which nobody gets 50 percent of the vote! You have two years with a Republican president, House and Senate, two years with a Democratic president, House and Senate, and 20 years of divided government in which very little gets done.

Because not only do the two parties have deeply divergent views of what the future of the country ought to look like, but also any attempt at working together is hampered by the fact they're still fighting the Civil War.

In fact, when the Democrats win control of the House in 1874 for the first time in 16 years, it's called "the Victory of the Brigadiers," because so many former Confederate officers are elected in the South by basically wiping out, through violence, the black Republican vote.

So when you look back, you realize there are these moments we've forgotten. That the election of 1800 ended in a tie in the electoral college, and who would be the president was not decided until 15 days before he was to be sworn in. We gloss over the angry American politics of the 1820s and 1830s. We look through the Great Depression and we see the economic suffering, but we forget the strains in our political system.

Often, we look at our politics today and say, "Washington is broken. It doesn't work." And we think this is the first time this has ever happened. It isn't.

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There's a saying: "Nothing serves the good old days like poor memory."

Exactly.

Is the answer as simple as people spending more time reading about history?

That helps us to accept it, but it takes leadership to change it. Leadership has changed the course of the country and the nature of our politics for the better; someone will come along and, once again, help turn the country in a positive direction.

We were all wringing our hands in the late 1970s, and along came this B-actor from Hollywood [Ronald Reagan] who gave us a sense of optimism and purpose. And similarly, in 1896 along came the mild-mannered, reform-minded governor of Ohio [William McKinley] and united the country with a campaign that featured extraordinary moments.

There's a great moment on October 9, 1896, when 2,000 Confederate veterans of the same Shenandoah Valley campaign where McKinley fought, men who'd shot at him, came to pay their respects in Canton. And the country had never seen anything like it. Blue and gray mingled together.

And McKinley emerges on the porch and says, "Honor was not surrendered at Appomattox, only sectionalism. If we're ever forced to fight again, and God forbid that we have to, we shall fight as brothers under a common flag."

This was a moment of healing that the country needed, and it led to McKinley's victory, which was the biggest since Grant's reelection in 1872.

This conversation—like most conversations with you—feels like a history class. Is teaching something you enjoy?

I really do. I taught at the University of Texas' Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs. I was the only Republican on the faculty, proving that God has a sense of humor. I also taught undergraduates for several years in a joint appointment from the Journalism and Government departments at the university.

You're also teaching a campaign strategy class with former Obama political adviser David Axelrod.

David is a really good man, and we became friends over a shared experience. I wrote in *Courage and Consequence* about my mother's suicide. And I got an email from David while he was in the White House and he said, "I enjoyed your book and thought you might want to see this." Attached was



Karl Rove speaks to Ohio delegates at the 2004 National Republican Convention.

a thoughtful, deeply moving tribute he'd written as a young journalist to his father who committed suicide, as well.

Since then, David and I have worked together on suicide prevention programs. We're drawn together by this belief that as a society we need to talk more about the issue, so people feel comfortable asking for help. There's such a stigma attached to these emotions and to depression itself, which causes people, rather than seeking the help they need, to commit the ultimate undoable act. We appear together often and speak frequently to catch up on each other's lives.

You've spoken about how you use history to inform your work as a political analyst, but your work has also been very forward looking, particularly through the use of technology in campaigns. How did that start?

Early in my career, I was deputy chief of staff to Governor Bill Clements. We'd had a brief 100-plus year period during which we had not elected a single Republican governor in Texas.

And Bill said, "Run my reelection campaign, and if I win reelection, I want you to become my chief of staff." That would set the path of my life in a certain fashion, but I said "Governor, when you were my age, you started your own business, and I want to start my own business." So, I started a direct mail company in Austin at the age of 31.

Now, I knew I couldn't compete head-to-head with all the big professionals back East. I had to have an advantage, and that was technology. So, I invested in a Hewlett-Packard computer and a very sophisticated HP printer and began to do customization and personalization for direct mailing. It was simply not being done at that time.

At every step in my political career, I've seen new technology as an advantage in helping win an election. I happened to be in Waco a couple weeks ago, and in 1992 we had developed a computer model that allowed us to project the minimum winning coalition. And we also had taken advantage of the fact that for almost 14 years we'd had seven elections in a row in which we had these gigantic phone bank operations. And I'd been sort

PHOTOGRAPHS: PREVIOUS SPREAD; MARK WILSON/STAFF; THIS PAGE: SCOTT J. FERRELL/CONTRIBUTOR

of in charge of collecting all the data from that and then storing it.

Technology, ironically enough, if it's properly used, allows you to get back to the most personal form of campaigning, which is empowering individuals to talk to somebody who looks, thinks and sounds like them—maybe even who's known to them. That's the most powerful kind of campaigning you can do.

How about social media?

It's a revolution. I've been involved in a super PAC, American Crossroads Senate Leadership Fund, and in 2010, when we began, we spent about five percent of our budget on digital. Today it's about 30 percent. Now, there are some limitations, but there are great advantages and of course also serious problems. I'm deeply concerned about the fact that the internet and social media allow for such easy proliferation of false information. If you run a TV or radio ad or send mail, there are ways to find out who was behind it. But with digital communications you're often unable to find out from where or whom it's coming.

Whether in campaigns, at your company or in government, you've been building and leading teams for decades. What are your management principles?

First of all, I consider being an effective leader a continuous learning process. I cringe thinking about my early days starting a business at 31. The key lesson I've learned is that in order to serve a customer or, in the case of politics, gain enough of a person's trust to win their vote, you have to listen. It's sounds easy, but it's hard work.

Second, you have to have vision. Without that vision, nations perish, organizations perish, and campaigns fail. If you have an idea of what it is you want to achieve and can communicate that throughout your organization, the greater the chance of your success. Because people will come forward with great, powerful ideas for how to operate and succeed.

What did you learn about management from George W. Bush?

I learned a lot, first from Governor Bush and then President Bush, about how you have to have a deliberative process to arrive at big decisions. You need a structure in which everybody who has a stake in the outcome has a chance to be heard; find common ground on what constitutes the facts;

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find areas of agreement and crystallize the areas of disagreement; and then bring those disagreements forward, working toward a decision in a way that's respectful and honest, but also powerful.

I remember Governor Bush saying that when an argument was made to him in which there was likely to be disagreement, he wanted the arguments to be made respectfully, but he wanted them to be made as powerfully as possible. So, he encouraged us to share our arguments with those who might disagree, so people could properly prepare and hone their own responses. And when it finally came to him, people had built the best possible cases on both sides of the issue. So whatever the decision was, it was likely to be a better decision simply by going through such a tough process.

One thing I learned from him as governor, and driven home in the White House, was how important it was to make certain that people understood you could say uncomfortable things and respectfully disagree with a colleague. Even if you lost the argument, he'd go out of his way to make certain that he congratulated you on doing a good job. Because nobody's right all the time, and he wanted you to come back for the next discussion as deeply informed and as ready to argue as possible. Again, the goal was better decisions.

How about in terms of managing your own time?

I try to get the problems out of the way early in my day. At the top of my to-do list are the calls that I don't want to make, for example.

And I try to be disciplined with my time. That includes making certain that I read. I think readers are higher performers. Every person I know who's got an interesting book on the nightstand is an interesting person, as well.

Reading relaxes me and informs me, and it helps me remain disciplined. It's like when I'm writing a column. I found it was pretty easy to write a column when I started for The Wall Street Journal, but I'd be writing 1,400 or 1,500 words. When I realized I had to turn in 750 words, it required a significant level of discipline. So, I'd agonize every Tuesday and Wednesday, as I wrote my column, sweating over every word, because I only have 750 words and I needed to decide what's the most powerful and economical way to make my point.

That discipline is so important. ♦

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RAUL DAMAS is a Partner in Brunswick's New York office, specializing in public affairs and crisis communications. He worked for Mr. Rove while serving as Associate Director of Political Affairs in the White House.