

The Hotline

CONSULTANT CANDIDS

CONSULTANT CANDIDS: Soaring To Great Heights

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Whit Ayres is Pres. of Ayres, McHenry & Associates, Inc., a nat'l public opinion and public affairs research firm located in Alexandria, VA, that provides research and strategic advice for corps., assocs., and GOP candidates for public office. Roll Call called the firm "one of the best in the nation." Before establishing the firm, Ayres served as Sr. Exec. Assistant for Budget and Policy to SC Gov. Carroll Campbell (R) and a member of the political science faculty at the Univ. of SC. He is Treas. of the American Assoc. of Political Consultants. And today, Ayres is our "Consultant Candid."

What was your first job?

The toughest job I've ever had: teaching American History to five large classes of 8th graders every day in Greenville, SC. I loved the job, and would be dead if I were still trying to do it. Keeping their attention required so much energy I was exhausted by the end of the day. But I discovered that you can make history interesting to 8th graders if you are willing to go beyond boring dates and tell the American story with a human touch.

What is your proudest moment professionally?

Two moments tie: Helping Paul Coverdell win a Senate seat in Georgia in 1992, and helping Bill Frist win one in Tennessee two years later. Both candidates were enormous underdogs, and both defeated well-established incumbent senators.

What one event in a candidate's past would pose the biggest problem in a campaign?

A candidate can overcome almost anything in the past as long as it's truly in the past and he or she does not try to cover it up. Americans have great tolerance for true redemption. A past problem that continues to fester is

another matter entirely.

If you could be in any other line of work, what would it be?

My great debate was always political science or law. I think I would enjoy law, and I appreciate the clean thinking the law demands. But I have been very happy as an applied political scientist. It has put me into contact with some amazing people and challenging problems. Plus there are a lot more lawyers than pollsters.

Negative campaigning -- good or bad?

It depends. Making a case why someone should not hold an office is as relevant as finding out why a potential employee should not be hired. But the ad has to be true and relevant. I have seen more than one campaign blown up by its own negative ad that backfired because it was untrue or over the top.

Where is your happy place?

In my airplane on a clear day over the Blue Ridge Mountains. On a racquetball court when I'm playing well. Or anywhere with my 13-year-old daughter.

What is your favorite restaurant to meet clients at?

Any place with good sweet tea, a real rarity in the DC area.

What campaign (past, present or future) would you most like to be a part of?

A winning Presidential campaign.

What is the ideal number of clients to have at one time?

Enough to keep me involved and stimulated, but not enough to drive me crazy.

What firm/individual who does your kind of work for the other party do you respect the most, and why?

I respect and admire a lot of Democratic pollsters: Dave Beattie, Geoff Garin, Peter Hart, Mark Mellman, Mark Penn, Jef Pollock, Thom Riehle, Beth Schapiro, Doug Schoen, Alan Secrest.

What is the first section of the newspaper you read?

OK, let's be boring now: the national news section.

If you could only watch one news show, what would it be?

Brit Hume on FOX.

We're ending this feature with a question posed by the last interviewee. This is from GMMB's Susan DiLiddo Michels: Have Governors Romney and Schwarzenegger made it safe for Republicans to now support universal health care?

Not the HillaryCare version, but certainly something that would extend private health care insurance to the uninsured.

Pose a question for the next interviewee.

What political consultants are your role models?