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He's the man to fear – unless he's on your side

Director of her crucial North Carolina campaign, he's equal parts opposition researcher and top-notch strategist.

By Robin Abcarian

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Sitting on the sunny patio of a coffee shop last weekend, Averell "Ace" Smith hardly seemed the kind of guy to strike fear into a politician's heart.

The 49-year-old California political operative – who helped Hillary Rodham Clinton to victories in the California and Texas Democratic presidential primaries and is now running her North Carolina operation – was a study in bland: beige polo shirt, beige slacks, bright blue eyes framed by wire-rimmed glasses, a fringe of gray hair around a pink scalp.

Yet people – many of them fellow Democrats – frequently use melodramatic imagery to describe him.

"I believe that every life lesson in politics can be extrapolated from 'The Godfather,'" said Chris Lehane, a Democratic strategist and friend of Smith's who has worked for the Clintons.

"Some people are Fredos; at game time they disappear. There are Sonnys, who yell and scream... . The most effective ones are the Michael Corleones. Very quiet, they know under which rib to insert the knife... . Ace is a Michael Corleone."

The next round of the seemingly interminable quest for the Democratic nomination takes place Tuesday, when Indiana and North Carolina vote. They are the first contests since April 22, when Clinton beat Barack Obama in Pennsylvania.

The race is close in Indiana. In North Carolina, which has a sizable African American electorate, polls have shown Obama ahead, but Clinton has been gaining support over the last week. The fact that the Clinton campaign stationed Smith here signals how crucial the state is to her; she intends to fight for every vote.

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“Everyone knew that Pennsylvania was essentially going to be a walk for Clinton and that the whole thing would come down to Indiana and North Carolina,” said Joe Trippi, a top advisor to former presidential candidate John Edwards. “Guess where Ace Smith is? I don’t think that’s an accident.”

If Smith can help Clinton seriously narrow Obama’s margin of victory – or even beat him – in the Tar Heel State, the New York senator’s argument that she is the more electable of the two will gain considerable strength.

A victory would also burnish Smith’s reputation as a top-notch strategist and perhaps change his image as a fearsome practitioner of a dark political art: opposition research.

Ben Austin, a Democratic political consultant who worked in the Clinton White House and now supports Obama, put it this way: “He is one of the few balding, bespectacled guys who I wouldn’t want to run into in a dark alley.”

But not all Democrats are fans. “It’s admirable if you can lie and get away with it,” said Kam Kuwata, a consultant to former Los Angeles Mayor James Hahn, who ran against Smith client Antonio Villaraigosa

twice – successfully in 2001, unsuccessfully in 2005.

And Republicans? Attorney Ken Khachigian, a longtime Republican strategist, is a reluctant admirer. He faced off with Smith in 2006 when a client, former state Sen. Chuck Poochigian, lost to Smith client and former Gov. Jerry Brown for California attorney general. “He does what he has to do,” Khachigian said. “He’ll be relentless and tough. He fits right in with the Clinton war machine.”

Khachigian figured in Smith’s biggest political heartbreak. In 1990, Smith was deeply involved in the campaign of his father, longtime San Francisco Dist. Atty. Arlo Smith, who ran against Dan Lungren for state attorney general. Smith won on election day but lost two weeks later when absentee ballots barely put Lungren over the top.

Even now, Ace Smith has a hard time discussing it: “I’ll tell you something. I have a tremendous amount of empathy for President Clinton... I mean, if you see someone criticizing, attacking your father, in my case, or his wife, in his case, you just want to slug ‘em.”

Nevertheless, he said, “you cannot run campaigns if you can’t remain calm in the

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face of adversity and bad polls. The best thing is to be as dispassionate as possible.”

Up and down the state of California, political reporters have Ace Smith stories. They speak of heavy boxes landing on their desks, ammunition culled from public records that Smith hopes will shape the campaign narrative.

The topic might be voting records, inflated resume claims, long-ago brushes with the law or questionable business dealings. Not infrequently, stories ensue. Reporters say he is charming, helpful, tenacious and not averse to going over their heads to editors in an attempt to shape a story – or kill one if he senses it is going to make a client look bad.

When The Times reported in 2006 that Los Angeles City Atty. Rocky Delgadillo – then running for attorney general – falsely claimed to have played professional football in Canada, Smith – representing Democratic primary rival Brown – made sure reporters had copies of the team roster for the Hamilton Tiger-Cats. In 2005, working for Villaraigosa, he figured, correctly, that a minor billing scandal in the DWP would tar then-Mayor Hahn as a do-nothing who allowed corruption to flourish.

“Ace is very mischievous, in a dark way,” said real estate developer Steve Soboroff,

whose unsuccessful campaign for Los Angeles mayor in 2001 marked Smith’s transition from opposition researcher to campaign manager.

Soboroff recalled that Smith was annoyed at a reporter and invited him to a meeting, promising to give him a scoop and telling him he had to be there at a certain time.

“So when the reporter showed up,” Soboroff said, “we were holding the elevator, and as soon as he got close enough to see us, Ace said, ‘Oh no, it’s too late.’” The elevator doors closed, leaving the reporter behind, scoopless.

Smith – whose company, SCN Public Relations, has earned about \$140,000 from the Clinton campaign since 2007 – works out of his home in the upscale Marin County town of Kentfield, where he lives with his wife, Laura, a fundraiser, and their children, Abram, 17, and Lili, 14.

He specializes in California races, but Smith has worked all over the country. In the late ’80s, he traveled nationwide as political director of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee. In 1992, before Bill Clinton’s first presidential campaign, he produced “vulnerability studies” (the genteel term for “oppo” on your own guy) for the Arkansas governor.

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When Smith heard that the Clintons wanted him in North Carolina, he did what he always does before parachuting into a state: grabbed his copy of “Inside U.S.A.,” a 1947 guidebook by journalist John Gunther. “I always start there,” he said. Then he picks up a AAA guidebook: “I read that start to finish ‘cause it has all these odd little facts and pieces about small towns and you get a real flavor for what’s going on.”

This year in particular, small towns are a major part of his strategy. With Obama faring better in the big cities and among the affluent and well-educated, hitting the smaller population centers has been crucial to Clinton’s success. Smith will often send Bill Clinton, who can pop in and out of small towns with ease. (Getting Hillary Clinton there is a cumbersome operation: big jet, lots of aides, the national press.)

Indeed, on Wednesday the former president held rallies in seven North Carolina towns whose populations ranged from less than 3,000 to 23,000. Smith said his internal polling shows that African Americans still have the highest regard for Bill Clinton, even though he has made remarks about Obama that offended many.

“He is enormously talented at looking at voting patterns and demographics and figuring out where you can actually put

votes together,” Lehane said. “I remember the day before the California primary, there were polls showing it was a dead heat, and some even had Obama surging ahead. The campaign was hectoring him from the East Coast, and he guaranteed them a 10-point win, which is exactly what he delivered.”

How could he make such a guarantee? Easy, Smith said. “The way we put it away well before election day was to get millions and millions of Democratic women to cast their ballots ... before the election. Everything we had was geared to getting all those votes, absentee.”

County registrars had lists of those who’d returned absentee ballots, and Smith, with an army of volunteers on cellphones, polled a couple of million of them. “We got to a point,” said Smith, “where it was mathematically impossible for Obama to win on election day.”

North Carolina is a different story. “In California, Hillary went in with an institutional and demographic advantage,” said consultant Austin, referring to her name recognition and popularity among Latinos.

“In North Carolina, Obama goes in with the demographic advantage, and if Ace can pull that out, he will truly have proved his mettle.”

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