




# How Michael Avenatti Learned DNC Character Assassination Political Dark Arts Under Rahm Emanuel

In the 1990s, as an entry-level opposition researcher, Avenatti once climbed aboard a moving train to get research to FedEx on time.

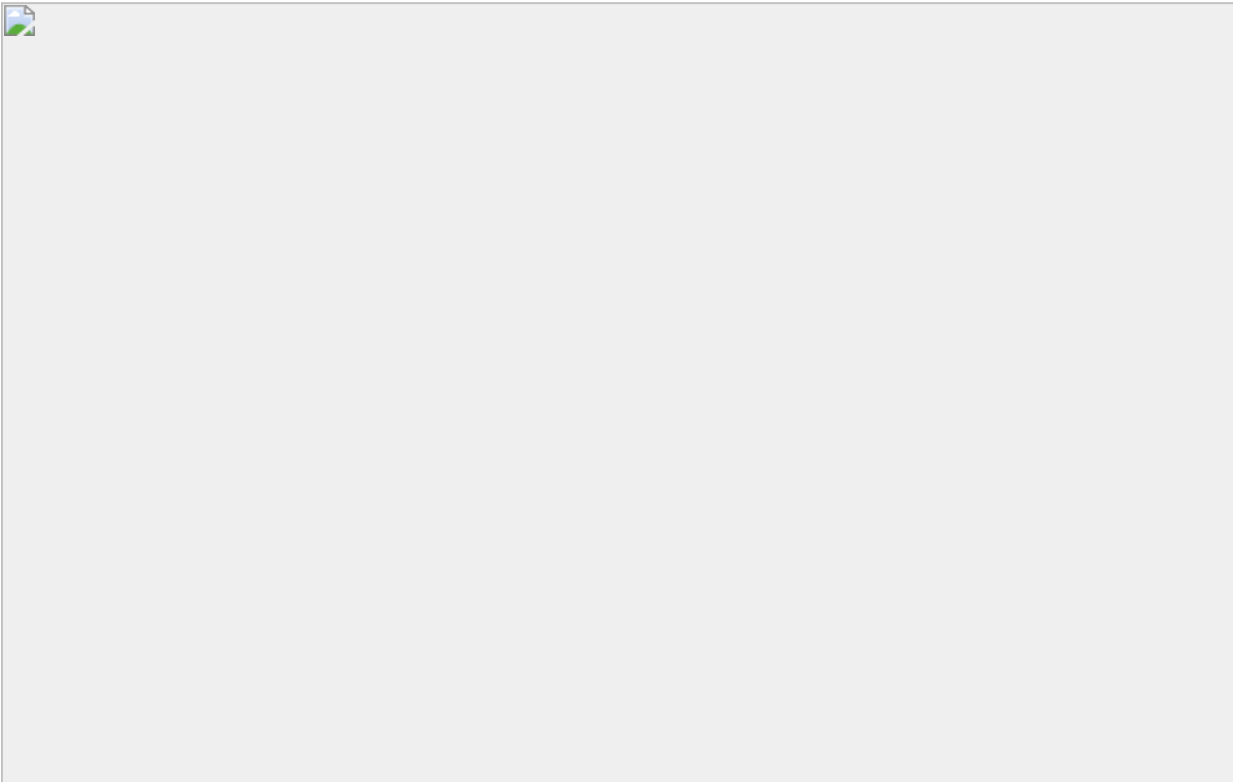
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Many politicians spent their younger days working or volunteering for campaigns, and they now regale voters with stories about knocking on doors for a candidate whose virtue appealed to their young idealism.

But Michael Avenatti, the TV-ready lawyer representing Stormy Daniels in her legal battle with Donald Trump, began his political career as a trainee in what is now one of the least sympathetic places in Democratic politics: as an opposition researcher for the Clinton machine.

Now Avenatti is considering running for president, and his origin story will test a dark thesis: that what Democrats want, more than hope or change or a return to normal, is simply to destroy Donald Trump. Avenatti is already making that pitch. In a speech last week at an Iowa Democratic fundraiser, an early presidential testing ground, he positioned himself as a fighter willing to brawl with Trump in a way other candidates would find uncomfortable. He has taunted the president and his team in cable news appearances and on Twitter, driving media fervor with mysteriously obtained (and released) financial information about Trump lawyer Michael Cohen.

In the 1990s, according to Avenatti, he worked on 150 campaigns across 42 states, almost exclusively for Democrats. “I worked on mayoral, congressional, gubernatorial, senatorial. You name it. I’ve worked on Democratic campaigns,” he said in an interview.

The races, he recalled, included one of Joe Biden’s Senate campaigns, a Senate race in Pennsylvania, a Philadelphia mayoral race, the 1994 Iowa gubernatorial race, and others. He worked in Ohio on an insurance-related ballot issue. And he remembers fondly victories like Karen Shepherd's, who won a narrow race for a Utah congressional seat in 1992.

“Someone said to me the other day that 2018 is the year of the woman in American politics. I chuckled and said, ‘I’m getting really old,’” Avenatti said. “I worked on the last year of the woman in 1992. It was fresh off the Thomas confirmation hearings, and women were rightfully outraged.”

***Opposition research can be dry, boring, difficult work: pulling property records and financial filings, reading old news stories and books, and listening to hours***

*of old interviews that may not produce anything useful, and traveling to libraries and courthouse basements to pull those records, stories, and tapes.*

Avenatti's jobs were those kind of entry-level basics. But the work was for some of the central players in Democratic politics over the last few decades, in a field where the difference between an OK researcher and a great one is vast, and outside of discipline, the core competency is simple: news judgment. Avenatti got his start in 1989 at St. Louis University working on the campaign of the late George "Buzz" Westfall, who was elected St. Louis County Executive the next year.

Tom Irwin, Westfall's campaign manager, said that early in the campaign, the candidate's wife brought in a letter from a student who hoped to volunteer. "He was poised. He was ready. He was one of the core guys around that campaign," Irwin said.

The Westfall campaign was being advised by the Research Group, a political consulting firm with a generic name that specialized in opposition research. It was run by Rahm Emanuel.

Then and now, Emanuel was known for a brutal, high-intensity style that began with "oppo." ("All I can say is, 'take no prisoners' works," George Stephanopoulos told the Washington Post in 1992 of Emanuel, after he went from research in Chicago to raising millions for Bill Clinton's campaign — and since then to the White House to Congress back to the White House and is presently mayor of Chicago.)

Irwin said that Emanuel's firm requested a reliable staffer within the Westfall campaign with whom it could coordinate tasks like pulling public documents in St. Louis County. The campaign appointed Avenatti for the role, and Irwin said that he quickly excelled.

"Rahm always said this quote, 'Politics is the last true meritocracy,'" Mike Plante, a seasoned opposition researcher who worked closely with Avenatti and Emanuel, told BuzzFeed News. "In politics either you're successful or you're not, and sometimes you find these diamonds in the rough. You can rise to the top quickly, and that's exactly what happened with Mike." Avenatti continued his young political career as a "busy boy" when he worked on the campaign of former Missouri representative and House majority leader Dick Gephardt. He spent a majority of his time clipping news articles, sifting through records, and making copies in libraries and clerks' offices.

In a field known for its share of earnest young staffers, Avenatti made a strong impression. After repeatedly complaining to one clerk that the printer was out of toner, a colleague recalled, Avenatti wrote down the printer model and bought his own toner cartridge that he would install and remove every day. (“That’s true,” Avenatti said.)

Avenatti was also tasked with compiling the research that had been done during the week and shipping it North Carolina to Plante, who was leading the opposition research team on the Gephardt campaign. In one instance, Avenatti was running late to ship the research with another staffer when their car got stuck in standstill traffic thanks to a passing train. Avenatti, fearing he wouldn’t make it in time, climbed onto the moving train, hopped to the other side, and ran to the FedEx to deliver the research — a move that earned him the respect of Plante and Emanuel.

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A representative for Emanuel didn’t respond to requests for comment.

Avenatti graduated law school in 1999 and began his legal career, but throughout the ’90s when he was a student, Avenatti continued working in research until about 1997, he said, first with Emanuel’s firm.

The Research Group wound down when Emanuel left to work on Clinton’s campaign, but Avenatti said he worked under other operatives who had started their own political consulting shops, like Plante and Ace Smith, who now advises high-profile politicians like the probable next governor of California, Gavin Newsom, and likely presidential candidate Sen. Kamala Harris. (At a book party for Smith earlier this summer, Harris dubbed him “the father of oppo research.”)

Now, Avenatti wants Democratic voters to know that he is not, in fact, some political newcomer, and he has become touchy when critics suggest his flirtation with a run for president is a Trump-inspired publicity stunt. On Twitter, he fired back at conservative Washington Post columnist Jennifer Rubin, who said on MSNBC that Avenatti had never been a Democratic operative or candidate. “I think looking at him, Democrats would and should be insulted that he thinks he can come into their party at the last moment and run for president,” she said.


“When Jennifer Rubin says I’m a Johnny-come-lately or that the Democratic Party should be outraged that I came out of nowhere, that’s a bunch of nonsense,” Avenatti told BuzzFeed News. “I’ve worked on more Democratic campaigns than anyone I know.”

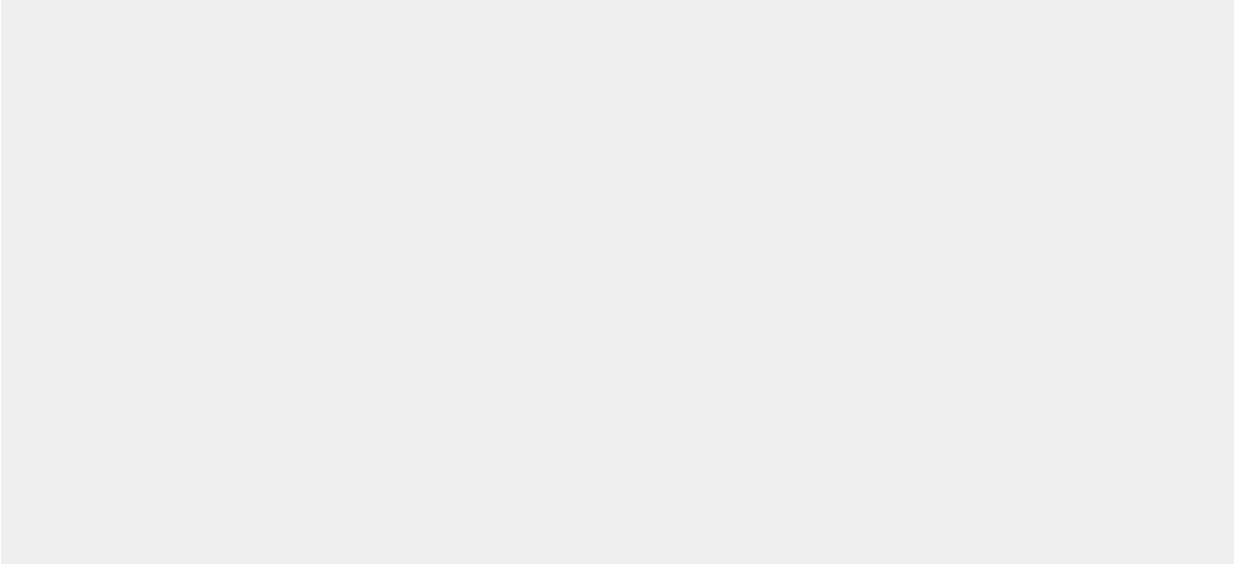
It’s a change of emphasis for Avenatti. When he first lit up TV with his defense of Daniels, his adult film actor client, his past work in Democratic politics became something of a liability, providing a hook for the idea that the legal battle against Trump was politically motivated. Avenatti called those charges “laughable” at the time, denying the notion that Daniels was backed by Democratic Party interests and downplaying his political work as ancient history.

Avenatti maintained that he hasn’t changed his position on his political past. “As it relates to a potential political career, I’m more the client,” he said. “As it relates to Stormy Daniels, I’m the attorney.”

And as client, Avenatti is already positioning himself. He posted on Twitter a summary of his policy stances on topics like immigration (he doesn’t support abolishing ICE) and jobs, while embracing progressives on issues like Medicare for all. He described his political philosophy to the Washington Post as “a Bill Clinton Democrat who embraces a few fundamental concepts of the progressive left.”

Avenatti has never served in office, and he has stressed that his greatest appeal is a willingness to aggressively take on Trump.

 Avenatti in Iowa last week.



Avenatti in Iowa last week.

*Stringer / Reuters*

“At first I thought this was just another ploy to raise his profile, but he’s actually taking this seriously,” one Democratic strategist told BuzzFeed News. “I think he’s offering his political background for some of those critics, but his main push is going to be that he’ll go toe-to-toe with Trump and right now the Democratic base would drag themselves through the desert and back for someone that would do that.”

This weekend, Avenatti will travel to New Hampshire, the first-in-the-nation primary state, for a Democratic summer picnic. (BuzzFeed News spoke to Avenatti in a phone interview from Guatemala, where he was helping to reunite a boy in US custody whose mother had been deported.)

In a way, his political work could serve him well in a Trump-fueled cable news environment, given that the entire point of opposition research is dropping a nugget of information to influence the media narrative.

When Avenatti talks of his political work, a somewhat familiar presidential campaign refrain — about the dangers of politics and the importance of connecting with voters — takes shape. Avenatti said that he was burned out from his political experience before leaving for law. “I have seen the soft underbelly of politics at that point and I was fairly disillusioned.”

And yet, Avenatti said his time in the political arena allowed him to travel the country and talk with people, a life lesson he said would be beneficial if he does decide to run for president.

“I think that experience has been very helpful in my legal career,” Avenatti said. “It’s been very helpful in connection in this [Stormy Daniels] case, and it would be helpful in the case that I decide to run.”