Roger Stone, Political Animal

BY MATT LABASH
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Being a skilled confidence man is both a blessing and a curse. If you truly excel at the long con, raising it to a form of art, marks will never know they’ve been taken. But if you become renowned for such artistry, when it is synonymous with your very name, people never believe you’re off the grift, even when you’re playing straight.

Such is the life of Roger Stone, political operative, Nixon-era dirty trickster, professional lord of mischief. It’s hard to assume he’s not up to something, because he always is. He once said of himself, “If it rains, it was Stone.” For that’s the view most people take of him. Three years ago, everyone from the DNC’s Terry McAuliffe to the leftwing blogosphere blamed him for leaking George W. Bush’s forged Air National Guard records, the ones that looked like they would damn Bush, but ultimately blew up Dan Rather’s career. It’s preposterous, he says, a triple bank shot that no one could ever have conceived of. “I get blamed for things I have nothing to do with,” he says, somewhat wounded. But when asked about all the things he doesn’t get blamed for that he does have something to do with, he thinks a bit, then shrugs. “It does balance itself out,” he says.

Naifs might say he’s a cancer on the body politic, everything that is wrong with today’s system. But maybe he is just its purest distillation: Politics is war, and he is one of its fiercest warriors, with the battle scars to prove it.
The first time I laid eyes on Roger Stone he was standing poolside at a press conference on the roof of the Hotel L’Ermitage in Beverly Hills. With a horseshoe pinkie ring refracting rays from the California sun and a gangster chalk-stripe suit that looked like it had been exhumed from the crypt of Frank Costello, Stone was there to help his friend and longtime client Donald Trump explore a Reform party presidential candidacy in 2000.

Actually, it was more complicated than that. After having recruited Pat Buchanan to seek the nod (“You have to beat somebody,” Stone says), he pushed Trump into the race. Trump relentlessly attacked Buchanan as having “a love affair with Adolf Hitler,” but ended up folding. A weakened Buchanan went on to help the Reform party implode, and Republicans suffered no real third-party threat, as they had in 1992, thus helping Stone accomplish his objective. If, in fact, that was his objective. These things are often hard to keep track of with Roger Stone.

Trump’s short-lived campaign provided lots of memorable Stone moments. There was the scene on the roof, where Stone, a dandy by disposition who boasts of having not bought off-the-rack since he was 17—he’s now 56—taught reporters how to achieve perfect double-dimples underneath their tie knots, while providing them hand sanitizers should they want to shake hands with the germaphobe Trump. Then there were the hardball negotiations he drove backstage at the Tonight Show, where he promised access to the dressing room, but only if we refrained from “making fun of Mr. Trump’s hair” in print.

But the moment that has most stuck with me came after reporters had just watched Trump dispense invaluable
able life tips at a Tony Robbins seminar (“Get even. When somebody screws you, screw ’em back—but a lot harder”). Stone mounted the bus, which in Trumpian fashion was named “A Touch of Class,” and announced, “I’m here. Who needs to be spun?”

It was a throwaway line, not even one of the serially quotable Stone’s best, but the naked cynicism at the heart of it might be why his fans in the press corps over the years have called him things like “a state of the art sleaze-ball,” “an extreme rightwing sleaze-ball,” and the “boastful black prince of Republican sleaze” (the sleaze theme is popular). Color me contrarian, but I will say something I don’t believe another Washington reporter has ever admitted publicly: I like Roger Stone.

Over the years, we’ve had our ups and downs: the occasional threats of litigation over some piece I was writing about one his clients, his playful stabs at blackmail over fabricated infractions (once accusing me of hitting on his wife at a Reform party convention by giving her my cell phone number, at a time when I had neither met her nor acquired a cell phone). He doesn’t actually mean any of this, of course—he’s just keeping in game-shape.

It’s why I find sentiments like “Who needs to be spun?” strangely refreshing. Unlike most political hacks, who are bloodless participants in a pageant which turns almost entirely on artifice, Stone acknowledges the game and his exploitation of it. He often sets his pronouncements off with the utterance “Stone’s Rules,” signifying listeners that one of his shot-glass commandments is coming down, a pithy dictate uttered with the unbending certitude one usually associates with the Book of Deuteronomy. Some original, some borrowed, Stone’s Rules address everything from fashion to food to how to screw people. And one of his favorite Stone’s Rules is “Unless you can fake sincerity, you’ll get nowhere in this business.” He is honest about his dishonesty. “Politics with me isn’t theater,” he admits. “It’s performance art. Sometimes, for its own sake.”

He has dabbled in at least eight presidential campaigns, everything from working for Nixon’s Committee To Reelect the President (CREEP) in 1972, to helping stage the infamous 2000 Brooks Brothers Riot in Miami, where angry Republicans in loud madras shorts and pinstriped suits helped shut down the Miami recount. (Stone was directing traffic by walkie-talkie from a nearby van.)

He made his bones as a principal in the Reagan-era lobbying firm Black, Manafort & Stone. Stone’s bread is now primarily buttered by strategizing for corporate clients, everything from casino interests to the sugar industry, but his love of the action insures that he is usually waging at least one exotic war on the political periphery.

For instance, after Trump, he went on to advise the gubernatorial campaign of New York billionaire Tom Golisano. It can be regarded as a revenge fantasy against George Pataki who Stone considers a counterfeit conservative, and whose lobbying commission dinged Stone and Trump for a $250,000 settlement—Trump paid—the largest in state history, for not filing lobbying reports about radio ads attacking the expansion of Indian casino interests. It chafes Stone to this day. He is adamant that the settlement contained no admission of wrongdoing, and says it wasn’t his call, joking that Trump settled because “he’s a pussy.”

Stone exacted a little revenge by causing headaches for Pataki, who won the 2002 general election, but who was aced out of the desired Independence party nomination by
Golisano. This was partly due to tried-and-true Stone ploys such as mailing voters official-looking envelopes inscribed with “Important Property Tax Notice,” while the message inside informed voters that since George “Patakifeller” had been governor, “property taxes in your county have increased by nearly 48.9 percent.”

In Stone capers, revenge is a powerful motivator. His friend Jeffrey Bell—an occasional contributor to this magazine—had Stone run his failed bid for New Jersey senator in 1982. Bell says that Stone was so agitated at losing the Republican primary to the dearly beloved, pipe-smoking, septuagenarian Millicent Fenwick that Stone packed Bell’s pollsters off to her Democratic opponent, Frank Lautenberg, and they persuaded his campaign to attack her on age grounds. Lautenberg narrowly won. Bell, who’d resisted the tactic, recalls hearing Stone saying something to the effect of “I am going to kill that woman.” “He’s a lord of mischief,” laughs Bell. “He likes money, and has made plenty of it, but that’s not the prime mover. I don’t think he’s that ideological. He’s a political junkie. He loves to be in the middle of it.”

Shortly after Golisano’s defeat, Stone got involved in advising Al Sharpton’s 2004 presidential campaign. Many cast Sharpton as the Trojan horse Stone was trying to ride into the enemy camp. Stone doesn’t deny that it was great fun watching Sharpton take the piss out of Howard Dean for not employing minorities—which he did at Stone’s prompting. But he dismisses any grand conspiracy: “I love the game. I’m a kibitzer. I couldn’t resist giving him good advice. He followed some, he ignored most.” Though as Sharpton’s campaign manager Charles Halloran, an old Stone crony, told me during the South Carolina primary in 2004, “If Roger found some ants in an anthill that he thought he could divide and get pissed off with each other, he’d be in his backyard right now with a magnifying glass.”

I hadn’t had dealings with Stone since the Sharpton campaign, but became convinced we needed to renew our acquaintance in August. Stone had been retained in June, for $20,000 a month, to help demoralized New York State Republicans gain ground from the caped-crusader/governor Eliot Spitzer (who many, including Spitzer, seem to regard as some sort of cross between Robert Kennedy and Jesus). Stone and a loose collection of co-conspirators began battering the governor for his administration’s numerous ethical lapses. (When I called Stone for this story, he asked if I’d gotten all the anti-Spitzer emails. I told him I wasn’t sure, it seemed like I’d been receiving five a day for months from all sorts of mysteriously named accounts. “Good,” he said. “It’s working.”)

In July, Spitzer took a major hit when the state’s Democratic attorney general, Andrew Cuomo, chastised the governor’s office for asking the state police to keep tabs on Republican state senate leader Joseph Bruno (Stone’s client) and for peddling travel documents to the press to try and create a “Choppergate” scandal. Bruno was cleared of misusing the state’s air fleet, and Stone and his associates have kept up a relentless anti-Spitzer email blitz. (One of their recent Spitzer missives showed Osama bin Laden driving a New York City cab, referring to Spitzer’s bone-headed play of allowing illegal immigrants to obtain driver’s licenses without proof of citizenship.)

Stone seemed more interested, however, in refocusing attention on an old scandal that had been wheezing along: a more complicated story, but one he regarded as having possible criminal repercussions thanks to a shady tangle of loans. Stone believes in waging multiframe wars, and his philosophy on the subject is one of the most sacred of Stone’s Rules, right up there with “Don’t order fish at a steakhouse,” “White shirt+tan face=confidence,” and “Undertakers and chauffeurs are the only people who should be allowed by law to wear black suits.” It goes like this: “Hit it from every angle. Open multiple fronts on your enemy. He must be confused, and feel besieged on every side.”

At issue is a $5 million campaign loan given to Spitzer by his multimillionaire father, Bernard, during the 1998 race for attorney general. During that campaign, Spitzer claimed that he’d secured the loan by mortgaging apartments given to him by his real-estate developer father. He appears to have lied, however, having later admitted that his father was essentially financing the campaign by paying off the loan—a possible violation of campaign law. The story wasn’t nearly as sexy as Choppergate until the Spitzer camp announced that on Monday, August 6, the 83-year-old Bernard Spitzer had received a message from a phone traced to Roger Stone’s Central Park South apartment. A voice that appeared to be Stone’s said:

This is a message for Bernard Spitzer. You will be subpoenaed to testify before the senate committee on investigations on your shady campaign loans. You will be compelled by the senate sergeant at arms. If you resist this subpoena, you will be arrested and brought to Albany—and there’s not a goddamn thing your phony, psycho, piece of s— son can do about it. Bernie, your phony loans are about to catch up with you. You will be forced to tell the truth. The fact that your son is a pathological liar will be known to all.

Stone denied it was him. Bruno didn’t take a position, but threw Stone overboard anyway, terminating his contract. And everyone I know who knows Roger Stone had the same reaction: Of course he did it. I didn’t even need to hear the tape (which pretty much cinches it) before coming to this conclusion. The speech is absent his sparkling wit, but the rest of the touches are his: the B-movie-gangster
intimidation, the high-wire dramatics, the swinging song-of-the-street cadences à la Sinatra abusing an underling after a couple of Jacks on the rocks.

Over the next week, Stone offered an array of exotic alibis, almost as though he were joking. Possibly, he was. (He did, after all, in the middle of the hubbub, get Richard Nixon’s head tattooed on his back at the Ink Monkey in Venice Beach and send a photo of it to reporters, just out of pukish spite.) He initially claimed it couldn’t have been him, since at the time of the call in question, he’d been attending the play *Frost/Nixon*. Reporters unearthed a small inconsistency; there’d been no performance that night. Stone posted a review of the play on his Stonezone website anyway, recommending it to Spitzer since “It underlines the dangers of hubris and the inexorable web a public official tangles himself in when he tells a lie.” He admitted, however, that he’d confused the dates—an honest mistake. He may be a dirty trickster, but he’s not a philistine; he knows the theaters are dark on Mondays.

From there, the story only got stranger. Various other alibis had Stone suggesting somebody used “spoofing” technology to make the phone call look as if it had originated from his apartment. He also offered the possibility that a disgruntled former colleague—and stand-up comedian/impressionist—named Randy Credico impersonated Stone to sandbag him. Credico denied it, telling the *Washington Post*, “That’s hilarious.” Stone also floated the theory that the landlord of his Central Park South building, H. Dale Hemmerdinger, who is a Spitzer supporter and his pick to head the Metropolitan Transit Authority, might have allowed someone into Stone’s apartment to make the call.

Later, Stone made public a two-page apology he’d written to Hemmerdinger. He said that he regretted “any inconvenience or distress my initial comments may have caused . . . despite our political differences, I must say that 40 Central Park South is an excellent building that is extremely professionally operated by capable employees at all levels.” Then came the cherry on top: “I am certain that you will render great public service to the MTA.”

On its face, the letter appears to be your standard inoculation against potential litigation, but rereading it I get chills. For me, red flags are flapping every which way, as they would for anyone who knows one of the most sacrosanct of Stone’s Rules: “Always praise ’em before you hit ’em.”

I arrange to see Stone in Manhattan, where he spends roughly one day each week, and Miami, where he lives. But beforehand, he threatens to take me to Ukraine, where the local press has outed him as being involved in the parliamentary campaign of Volodymyr Lytvyn, an Orange Revolutionary alum who’s been mentioned as a future president. Like many American political consultants, Stone does the odd election overseas, though he likes to keep it quiet, since it often causes a local furor because “Americans are now hated everywhere in the world—thank you, George W. Bush.”

“I don’t particularly want to go,” he says. “Our lives will be in danger. We will have bodyguards. Plus, the food sucks.” On the upside, he says, we’ll have a buxom translator named Svetlana, and “We can stop over in Amsterdam on the way home, for all the obvious reasons.” But, it turns out we don’t need to go; his guys on the ground have it covered. But it’s a constant struggle, he says: “The Russians love intrigue.” As though he doesn’t.

He is in perpetual dispute with Lytvyn’s local advisers, who he calls the Poliburo. They deliberately mistranslate his ads to reflect their own clunky slogans, and he resents their interference, since what could they know about winning free and fair elections, being recently converted Communies and all. The atmosphere is charged enough that he has now taken to sending secret messages directly to the candidate, nicknamed “Mister.” Since his team assumes all their communications are monitored, they use code names such as “Buckwheat” and “Beetle.” Stone’s is “Mr. Pajamas,” the same one used by ur-Nixon Dirty Trickster Murray Chotiner, one of his personal heroes and mentors. (Lytvyn’s party was successful in the elections.)

I ask Stone how the Spitzer phone call story played over there. He says it’s been a boon. Whether he did it or not—and he reminds me he didn’t—“they thought it was great.” He adopts a thick Ukrainian accent: “We like this. It shows Stone is not a pussy.” “It means you have balls and aren’t afraid to mix it up,” he explains of the call, which if he had made it, it should be noted, was perfectly legal. Things over there tend to be a little more bare-knuckle. It is a place after all, where a politician occasionally gets poisoned by dioxin. “They do say to me, ‘Why did they get rid of Nixon, we don’t understand?’ I say well, his guys broke into the headquarters of the opposition. ‘Yeah, so—that’s a reason to get rid of him?'”

From his speech to his dress, Stone’s an old-school guy with old-school rhythms and tends to prefer old-school haunts, like Gallagher’s and the 21 Club. A chronic workaholic, he will nearly always drop what he’s doing to eat elaborate sit-down meals. Our first night, we tuck in at Sparks Steak House, which is all dark woods and white table cloths and rich history. Gambino boss Paul Castellano was whacked on the sidewalk outside on John Gotti’s orders.

It’s a bit nerve-racking figuring how to properly dress for a Stone engagement. His long-time tailor is Alan Flusser, author of the sartorial bible *Style and the Man,* and
one of Flusser’s associates tells me Stone knows enough to work there. Sitting across from him is a bit like sitting across from Mr. Blackwell: Suppose you accidentally went with a single-vent jacket rather than side vents, which Stone finds unthinkable (“I’m not a heathen”), or if you wore trendy flat-front suit trousers instead of ones with properly-draped pleats (“Pants today are like a little church in the valley—no ballroom”).

I read once that he has 300 solid-silver wedding ties. He’s says it’s an exaggeration—he only has about 100. But to give an idea of his obsessiveness, he owns so many suits that there are 100 in storage alone. His closets are meticulously ordered—even his jeans are organized “by jeainess.” He will launch into learned disquisitions on the differences among pencil, chalk, pin, and beaded stripes. He even has strict Stone’s Rules about his cufflinks: “Large hub-cap types are for mafia dons from Jersey and Las Vegas lounge singers. Cufflinks should be small, understated, and tasteful. No coffee grinders, no jet planes, no large stones.”

Stone makes the scene in a navy double-breasted peaked lapel suit of blue Shantung silk, a white Windsor collar over a blue-and-white striped shirt, white roll-back cuffs (he never says “French cuffs”), a blue patterned Flusser tie, and high-shine black slip-ons by C.J. Cleverly from London’s Burlington Arcade.

Though it’s unseasonably hot for September, I decide to break out a gray-flannel 3-button I’m particularly fond of, throwing caution to the wind. It’s one of Stones Rules: “Be bold. The more you tell, the more you sell,” courtesy of advertising guru David Ogilvy. (Stone keeps numerous copies of Ogilvy’s Confessions of an Advertising Man in his office to dispense to friends.) He says my suit’s weight passes muster. It’s a relief.

The guy at the table behind us doesn’t fare quite as well. Stone says he wants to remove the guy’s glasses and “stomp on them.” At first, I think they know each other and the guy owes him money. But no, it is just that the guy’s Eighties-style oversized tortoiseshells are “an affront to good taste.” This happens frequently while I’m in Stone’s company. Western-wear with suits drives him particularly bananas: “What do hemorrhoids and cowboy boots have in common?” he asks, “Every asshole eventually gets them.”

As we order the first round of drinks, he launches into his life story. Half Italian, half Hungarian, he grew up in Lewisboro, New York. His mom was a small-town reporter, his dad a well driller. It was a fairly lonely childhood. There were no kids around in his rural surroundings, so sports weren’t on the menu.

His dad left for work at 6 A.M., got home at 9 P.M., ate dinner, and dropped into bed. “You’re not playing catch with your old man,” he says. “My guess is he hated his job. But he never complained a day in his life. That’s what it took to put food on the table.” His folks still aren’t entirely sure what he does and wonder why Stone didn’t become “a plumber or an electrician or any of those guys who make good money.” But, when he was working on Ronald Reagan’s campaign in 1979, Stone introduced his dad to the candidate, which he calls “the proudest moment of my whole life. Reagan was great. He said, “Your son works very hard for us.” Of course, he had no idea what I did.”

Stone was bitten by the political bug early. In first grade, he supported John F. Kennedy, because he was Catholic, like Stone, and “he had better hair than Nixon.” During a mock election at school, Stone told classmates that
if Nixon won, he'd make kids go to school on Saturdays. “Kennedy swept the election,” he says proudly, “because of disinformation I spread about Nixon. It was kind of a first experience.”

His liberal convictions didn’t last long. After being given Conscience of a Conservative by a neighbor, he became a Goldwater zealot and rode his bike down to the local Republican headquarters each day to lick envelopes. While Stone considers himself a staunch Reaganite, with a libertarian twist that doesn’t want the government “telling me what to do in the boardroom or the bedroom,” he has mixed feelings today about his Goldwater infatuation. “It’s like he was trying to lose. Going to Tennessee and coming out against the Tennessee Valley Authority? These were suicidal acts.” As he developed his political worldview, he realized that Richard Nixon was “more pragmatic, more interested in winning than proving a point.” He took a Stone’s Rule from Nixon: “Losers don’t legislate.”

Becoming a student of political history, Stone deduced that Nixon “had been f—ed out of the presidency in 1960, thanks to Joe Kennedy and our mob friends.” He wrote a letter to Nixon, then practicing law on Wall Street, to that effect, telling him he should run again. Nixon wrote back, thanking Stone, saying he had no plans to run again, but that if he ever did, he’d be in touch. “Even then, he had full plans to run again,” says Stone.

Stone was a student at George Washington University, in Washington, D.C., when Nixon was running for reelection in 1972. Stone invited the deputy director of the Committee to Reelect the President, Jeb Magruder, to speak at the university’s Young Republican Club. “There are a bunch of hippie-type, leftwing, pinko degenerates that attend and harass him, but he handles it okay,” recalls Stone. “He had highly polished shoes, I remember that very distinctly.” Afterwards, Stone hit him up for a job and got one. “My academic studies went right into the toilet. I could read about it, or do it for real. I’d rather do it for real.” Though he was extremely junior, Nixon’s old hands—“the UCLA ratf—ers” Stone calls them—had him getting into all sorts of hijinks, such as contributing money to a possible Nixon rival in the name of the Young Socialists Alliance, then leaking the receipt to the Manchester Union-Leader.

By day, Stone says, he was working as a scheduler for Nixon surrogates. “By night, I’m trafficking in the black arts. Nixon’s people were obsessed with intelligence.” So at one point, Stone placed a mole in the Hubert Humphrey campaign, who ended up becoming Humphrey’s driver. His source reported back all kinds of information—mostly libelous—which Stone kicked up the chain.

Stone speaks of this time nostalgically, but also with some distaste. A lot of what Nixon’s henchmen were doing was “ineffective and relatively stupid. Typical of the mentality of the Nixon people who were about to beat McGovern by 20 points.” It goes against Stone’s beliefs to do risky things for no reason. Though he has represented many casino interests, he doesn’t gamble. “I never play games with my own money where the odds are stacked against you,” he says.

Stone went to work for the Office of Economic Opportunity, which managed most of LBJ’s War on Poverty programs. Bob Haldeman’s “charge to us was to dismantle, replace, and fire everybody.” After Nixon resigned, Stone spent the rest of the 1970s getting his Republican ticket punched. He worked for Senator Bob Dole (and was fired, after Jack Anderson reported he’d been a Nixon dirty trickster), worked for the Reagan campaign in 1976, was national chairman of the Young Republicans in 1977. He and his first wife honeymooned by serving as camp counselors at the Teenage Republican Leadership Conference.
A round the time he became northeast chairman of Reagan’s 1980 campaign, he had another awakening when he started working with the notorious lawyer Roy Cohn, former McCarthy henchman and also a Reagan supporter. “I’m still kind of a neophyte,” Stone admits, “still kind of thinking everything’s on the level. ‘Cause the truth is, nothing’s on the level.” At a 1979 meeting at Cohn’s Manhattan townhouse, he was introduced to major mobster and Cohn client Fat Tony Salerno. “Roy says to Tony, ‘You know, Tony, everything’s fixed. Everything can be handled.’ Tony says, ‘Roy, the Supreme Court?’ Roy says, ‘Cost a few more dollars.’” Stone loved Cohn: “He didn’t give a s— what people thought, as long as he was able to wield power. He worked the gossip columnists in this city like an organ.”

Stone, who going back to his class elections in high school has been a proponent of recruiting patsy candidates to split the other guy’s support, remembers suggesting to Cohn that if they could figure out a way to make John Anderson the Liberal party nominee in New York, with Jimmy Carter picking up the Democratic nod, Reagan might win the state in a three-way race. “Roy says, ‘Let me look into it.’” Cohn then told him, “‘You need to go visit this lawyer’—a lawyer who shall remain nameless—and see what his number is.” I said, ‘Roy, I don’t understand.’ Roy says, ‘How much cash he wants, dumbf—?’ Stone balked when he found out the guy wanted $125,000 in cash to grease the skids, and Cohn wanted to know what the problem was. Stone told him he didn’t have $125,000, and Cohn said, “That’s not the problem. How does he want it?”

Cohn sent Stone on an errand a few days later. “There’s a suitcase,” Stone says. “I don’t look in the suitcase . . . I don’t even know what was in the suitcase . . . I take the suitcase to the law office. I drop it off. Two days later, they have a convention. Liberals decide they’re endorsing John Anderson for president. It’s a three-way race now in New York State. Reagan wins with 46 percent of the vote. I paid his law firm. Legal fees. I don’t know what he did for the money, but whatever it was, the Liberal party reached its right conclusion out of a matter of principle.”

I ask him how he feels about this in retrospect. He seems to feel pretty good—now that certain statutes of limitations are up. He cites one of Stone’s Rules, by way of Malcolm X, his “brother under the skin”: “By any means necessary.” Reagan got the electoral votes in New York State, we saved New York State. Reagan wins with 46 percent of the vote. I paid Anderson for president. It’s a three-way race now in New York, his “brother under the skin”: “By any means necessary.”

NOVEMBER 5, 2007

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[More] Carter would’ve been an unmitigated disaster.

In the 1980s, Stone and his old friends Charles Black and Paul Manafort hung out their shingle—later to be joined by other skilled knife-fighters like the late Lee Atwater. Stone was often rivals with Atwater, though he affectionately cites his rules: “‘Lie low, play dumb, and keep moving.’ As opposed to mine, which are ‘Admit nothing, deny everything, launch counterattack.’ Often called the Three Corollaries.”

While Black, Manafort & Stone did work on behalf of blue-chip companies and boutique right-wing causes from the Contras to Angola’s UNITA rebels, what they really did was advise presidential candidates. They worked on so many campaigns that in 1986 (when Stone was working with Jack Kemp), a congressional aide remarked to a Time reporter, “Why have primaries for the nomination? Why not have the candidates go over to Black, Manafort & Stone and argue it out?”

At this point Stone was operating comfortably in the mainstream—collecting high-six-figure fees, having fashion stories written about him in GQ and Penthouse, throwing society-page annual birthday celebrations for Calvin Coolidge (“a great do-nothing president”)—but even then he demonstrated his self-destructive tendencies. In the thick of the 1988 election season, he called his colleague Lee Atwater’s client, George H.W. Bush, a “weenie” in print. Stone has a knack for alienating and says that the people who like him, like him, and those who don’t never will anyway.

He seems to think he moves faster alone. (Stone’s Rules: “Nobody ever built a statue to a committee.”) “I’m not good at brown-nosing. Unlike Atwater, I wasn’t willing to tell George Bush he’s the smartest guy in the world, ’cause he’s not. It’s probably not very bright on my part. But I kind of call them like I see them. So I tell Newsweek Bush is a weenie. I also tell them if you elect him as president, he’ll serve one term and drive the party to its knees, and he serves one term and drives the party to its knees. How do you lose to Bill Clinton? Guy’s a f—in’ hillbilly. It’s tough.”

Stone’s time-bomb tendencies brought a major life-change for him in 1996, effectively ending his career in mainstream presidential politics. While Stone was serving as an unpaid adviser to Bob Dole, the tabloids got hold of photos of Stone and his second wife, Nydia, striking come-hither poses in swinger’s ads, putting out the call for bedroom playmates with exacting specifications: “no smokers or fats please.”

His denials were adamant, his alibis elaborate. There was lots of talk about disgruntled employees and frame-ups and credit-card fraud. When I bring this up to Stone, he looks pained. He says the revelations really hurt his wife, which is what bothers him the most. As for the alibis, he shrugs, “I did the best with what I had—which wasn’t much.”

As I earlier stated, Stone is honest about his dishonesty. I figure in this case, it’s partly due to the drinks I ply him with at dinner. (Labash’s Rules: “Without alcohol, people tell you what they want to say. With alcohol, they tell you what you want to hear.”) But Stone comes clean on this,
too. Though he appears to knock down each drink I order him, it turns out he has had only one. He greased the waiter in advance, telling him to only bring olives and water in his martini glass after the first one. He didn’t want me to have the edge, in case I was there to whack him like Paul Castellano. It’s a trick he borrowed from Lyndon Johnson, who used to down iced tea in highball glasses to gain the advantage over dim-witted reporters who were slugging back the real thing.

Over the course of the week that I spend with Stone, we talk a lot about movies. He’s a film buff, and particularly likes the gangster/con-artist/caper genre. We agree on our favorite film: *Miller’s Crossing*, the 1990 Coen Brothers flick about underworld ethics. The film is filled with straight-razor repartee not unlike that often uttered by Stone—typical line: “It’s a wrong situation. It’s getting so a businessman can’t expect no return from a fixed fight. Now if you can’t trust a fix, what can you trust?”—and chock full of crosses and double-crosses. Characters’ motivations are constantly shifting or in question. Nothing is as it initially appears.

It gets me thinking about Stone’s own little Bernie Spitzer caper. When I outright accuse him of lying about it, he denies it, but barely: “Even if I did do this, which, like OJ, I didn’t, it’s not in my interest to cop to something I didn’t do.” But why would he do it? One of Stone’s Rules is “Avoid obviousness.” And nothing could be more obvious than this phone call, unless he just wanted it to look that way. Even his political rivals know that he is not a stupid man. When I tell a left-leaning political hand who himself frequently operates in the shadows that I’m doing a piece on Stone, he smiles wickedly, and says: “Whatever people think of Stone and his scandals, he is an absolute artist. He doesn’t feel useful if his knife is in the sheath.”

Stone’s business card features an elegant white-gloved man in top hat and evening clothes from a 1930s *Esquire* ad. He gave the card to a boy once, who looked at it and said, “Are you a magician?” His response: “Sometimes, kid.” One gets the sense with Stone, a showman above all else, that he has both the vanity and frustration of the professional illusionist. The trick is only fun to pull so long as someone knows he’s pulling it.

Theories abound as to what the trick might be. I float some of them by Stone. Perhaps it was a calculated risk. Make the call to Bernard Spitzer, knowing they’ll leak it. It regenerates headlines and gives the loan scandal new life. Sure, Stone takes a hit, and even appears to lose money when Bruno throws him under the bus, but Roger Stone doesn’t have to worry about sacrificing respectability, as he hasn’t been considered respectable in some time.

Meanwhile, he can fall back into the shadows where he does his best work, perhaps even start a 527 in the form of a concerned-citizens front group to raise money from the throngs of wingnuts and Wall Street types who bear grudges against Spitzer. A group like, say, the Citizens Committee for Checks and Balances, whose
fundraising letter I obtained, and who, among other things, wants to “expose the illegal activities of the Spitzer administration.” A group like that could not only pay one’s salary, but could also help one carry out the missionary work of blast mailings, email blitzes, and deep research that might eventually screw Spitzer to the wall (Spitzer’s poll numbers are currently at an all-time low). When I run this thought past Stone, he won’t confirm anything other than to say, “Shrewd theory.”

Once you cross over into Stone Zone psychology, it feels as though you’ve been dropped in the middle of a David Mamet script. No matter what’s been in the papers, nothing seems beyond the realm of possibility. I think about Randy Credico, the “master impressionist” who Stone has accused of impersonating him on Bernard Spitzer’s answering machine—the two have been sniping in the press. I suggest to Stone that the whole thing is a set-up. Kooky and implausible as the alibi was, he and Credico are probably in on this together and are just pretending to fight, professional-wrestling style. “Anything is possible,” Stone says, giving the air of someone with whom it’s fine if you believe the worst, since even if it’s not true, it just feeds the lore, and keeps everyone else confused.

I become so suspicious of Stone’s deception maneuvers, that I begin to suspect foul play everywhere. After lunch one day, he ditches me when I’ve been in a restroom too long, instructing a colleague to wait for me. When I catch up with him, I give him the third degree, asking him what that was all about, thinking he was trying to force me into conversation with his guy to casually plant something Stone didn’t want to tell me himself. “Once in a while—very rarely—things are benign,” Stone says. “Frankly, you were taking too much time in the john. I wanted to get back.”

But most of the time, things aren’t benign. One afternoon, it seems as though we are just walking the streets of Manhattan. Stone walks everywhere, abhorring cabs because they have lousy air conditioning and “sweating through a suit—that is the worst thing in the world.” His brisk gait is interrupted, however, in front of the Harmonie Club on East 60th Street. He stares at it for a while, then smiles.

He tells me that this place could soon become famous. In fact, it sort of already is. One of the city’s oldest Jewish gentleman’s clubs, it’s had a rash of bad headlines in recent years. Some New Yorkers consider it racist because of a lack of black or Hispanic members. Mayor Bloomberg saw fit to end his membership there in 2001, before his first mayoral run. And Barack Obama recently cancelled a fundraiser there on the same grounds.

A little bird has told Stone that Eliot Spitzer’s father, Bernard, is a member. Additionally, so is Dale Hemmerdinger, the landlord Stone profusely apologized to and who also happens to be Spitzer’s choice for chairman of the Metropolitan Transit Authority. It strikes Stone that a lot of blacks and Hispanics take public transit in New York, and he wonders how it would play if it were to become known that the governor’s pick belongs to a club that excludes them from membership. It seems like the sort of thing that might be troubling at a Hemmerdinger confirmation hearing. And it might be hard for Spitzer to walk away from his nominee, considering his own father belongs to the same club. Maybe nothing will come of it. But it’s weird sometimes, how the news can be going one way, then take a funny bounce.

A month later, it does. Brooklyn assemblyman Hakeem Jeffries writes a letter to Eliot Spitzer, urging him to pull Hemmerdinger’s nomination because he belongs to a predominantly white club, which “sends the wrong signal to the minority community.” At his confirmation hearing, Hemmerdinger defends his Harmonie membership, but just a day later, resigns from the club faster than you can cite the most apt of Stone’s Rules: “Never do anything till you’re ready to do it.”

He is confirmed, but the issue won’t die. Assemblyman Adam Clayton Powell IV charges Hemmerdinger lied during the senate committee hearing by representing that he’d actively recruited minorities while president of the Harmonie Club 20 years earlier, “unless he can show one [minority] person who was a member at the time, as he claimed.” Just a week later, it comes out that Bernard Spitzer has been a member of the exclusively white club for 30 years, an inconvenient aside that the governor’s aides neglected to mention when defending Hemmerdinger’s association with the Harmonie.

As all this unfolds, I ask Stone how he thinks his prophecy was fulfilled. “S— happens,” he says.
am being chauffeured around Miami in one of Stone's five Jaguars. At the wheel is A-Mill, his 23-year-old driver/computer whiz/all-around Boy Friday. A-Mill looks like he'd fight as a featherweight, but Stone says looks can be deceiving. One late night, when they were walking across a strip-club parking lot together, two large gentlemen tried to mug them. A-Mill reached into his boot, pulled out a blade, and slashed one of them across the face, causing both assailants to run. "Watch this guy," says Stone. "He's a killer."

A-Mill wears a porkpie hat of his own choosing, but with suits, he takes direction from Stone. When he first came to work for him, Stone took him to a haberdashery in Cleveland and lent him the money to buy four suits and some black Peal cap-toe lace-ups. "We deduct $50 from his paycheck each week to pay me back," says Stone. If you want to roll with Stone, you have to look good. (Stone's Rules: "Look good—feel good.")

As we head north of South Beach to Stone's home on Biscayne Bay, Stone reviews his morning itinerary. He will try to outwit some of his rivals in the Ukrainian campaign, dictate a threatening letter to an online magazine that he says has defamed him, and put out a few Stonezone pieces maligning one Spitzer crony or another. Stone is like a U.S. Army of treachery: He screws more people before 9 A.M. than most people do in a whole day.

Stone has a nice life in Miami. He gets out to kayak quite a bit, enjoying the year-round good weather. He and Nydia have five grandchildren. A power law firm based in Fort Lauderdale, Rothstein Rosenfeldt Adler, recently brought him on to head their burgeoning public affairs side. The firm's head, Scott Rothstein, is a pitbull litigator with a taste for Bentleys and $150,000 watches. He shares Stone's operating philosophy, telling me that he tells all his lawyers, "Get into the game, or get the f— out of the way." It's hard to tell when Stone stops talking about Nixon and starts talking about himself.)

One of Stone's friends, who's known him professionally for a decade, tells me: "What I find interesting about Roger is how committed to the joke he is. He moons the establishment for the sheer pleasure of it, with no thought to whether it helps him. Obviously most of the time it doesn't and maybe he cares—I'll bet he has mixed feelings—but he doesn't stop. Notice how he's willfully, self-consciously downmarket: Trump, Sharpton, the dyed hair and horse-shoe pinky ring. There's an ironic quality to all of it.

"He could have made a lot more money being Mike Deaver. It's not like he's not smart enough to have joined Cassidy and landed Microsoft as a client, like a thousand other semitalented former consultants. Instead, he's nearing 60 and still wallowing in the small-time sleaziness of New York State politics. And he doesn't even live there. There's no master plan with Roger. He just follows the most subversive, amusing course available to him at the time. I sort of respect that."

Stone, for his part, resists attempts to get him to wax maudlin about missed opportunities. But one night as we are having dinner at the Bal Harbour Palm, he talks about the swingers' tabloid scandal which effectively chased him out of Washington—a place he says he detests and doesn't miss. The hardest thing wasn't the story, he says. It was the day he left. The moving van was in front of his house, and he was ready to go. But his beloved Yorkshire Terrier, Pee Wee, ran out the door into the street, was struck by a car, and killed right in front of Stone and his wife. "It was like a final kick in the balls," he says. "I had a hard time getting over that. It's the single worst thing that's ever happened. Pee Wee was an extraordinary dog with a unique level of intelligence and personality. He's just a great dog, even still. And I really miss him."

I don't know what to say. I've never seen this level of vulnerability and human emotion from Stone. It makes me uncomfortable. I ask him what color the dog was. He seems mildly perturbed. "Brown and black—like all Yor-kies," he snaps. Wanting the Stone I know to return—I hate to watch men cry—I bait him by telling him I didn't know that, since I usually have man-dogs, not cat-dogs. He glares at me. "F— you," he says. "They were bred to hunt and kill rats. They are not pussy dogs. Tonight, I'll sic my five on you, and see how you do. They will eat your ass alive." It's good to have him back.

His disclosure, however, fosters a new level of understanding and trust. I order us another round of drinks, then go to the restroom. When I return, a tall martini is sitting in front of him. I eye it suspiciously. "What are you looking at?" he asks. "Your drink—what is it?" I inquire. "A martini, obviously," he replies. I ask him to slide it to me, which he reluctantly does. I taste it. I thought we were just a couple of pals a couple drinks into the evening, but I'd forgotten one of Stone's Rules: "Always keep the advantage." It was nothing more than water and olives.