

Rowena Cowan

## Report on Individual US Study Tour

10 October to 6 November 2000

Participation in the APEC United States study tour provided a unique opportunity to observe the process of the United States Presidential election campaign and the methods of the US Republican Party at close range.

My study tour took place during the last five weeks of the election campaign and included working in both the Research Unit of the Republican National Committee in Washington DC and the Victory 2000/Bush for President Office of the California Republican Party in Los Angeles.

The Director of the Research Unit of the Republican National Committee was Barbara Comstock, known for her previous work as a Chief Investigative Counsel for the House Government Reform and Oversight Committee. The unit was made up of more than 30 people, including policy analysts, academics, media advisers, long term political staff and volunteers.

The work of the Unit was specifically focused on the Democratic Party's Presidential candidate, Vice President Al Gore. The Research Unit provided the Bush campaign, based in Austin, Texas, with response material to any policy announcements, speeches or political statements made by Al Gore.

This work included monitoring web sites and media transcripts, checking newspaper and various historical records, checking vote records, Congressional speeches, public statements etc.

The Research Unit's role intensified throughout the period of the three Presidential Candidates debates. During each debate, the Unit provided instant attack or rebuttal points to issues raised or statements made by Vice President Gore. "Post debate spin" was also an integral part of the Candidate debates and in addition to the instant rebuttal process, the Research Unit released a comprehensive rebuttal statement to the media within 20 minutes of the conclusion of each debate.

A key example of the Research Unit's work was the aftermath of Vice President Gore's statement during the first debate, that he had visited Texas fire sites with FEMA director, James Lee Witt. The Research Unit found that Gore had not visited the sites with James Lee Witt, it had been another FEMA Executive. The point was picked up and used heavily by the media, making the front page of many newspapers and working to reinforce the assertion that Vice President Gore was prone to exaggeration and was therefore untrustworthy.

Following the final debate, the staff of the Research Unit were dispersed to various state offices of the Bush campaign.

The Victory 2000 office in Los Angeles was headed by RNC Regional Political Director, John Peschong, a former adviser in the Reagan White House.

The office oversaw the Bush Presidential campaign for the Republican Party in California. The campaign had more than 300 Victory 2000 offices across California and coordinated the work of almost 30,000 Republican Party volunteers throughout the State.

My chief responsibility in the campaign was the ethnic media buy for the Bush Campaign in California. The job involved liaising with the relevant ethnic newspapers and radio and television stations throughout the state, determining the expenditure for each group based on our budget, negotiating costs for advertisements and coordinating translations and the supply of copy to each outlet.

I was also involved in preparations for several rallies, including support rallies for Governor George Bush and protest rallies against President Clinton and Vice-President Al Gore.

In addition to the experience of working on a Presidential campaign and collecting new ideas for election campaigning in Australia, the study tour also provided an opportunity to observe the US electoral system in practice and contrast it with our own.

The four most outstanding features of this contrasting process were the amount of money spent, the complexity and impracticality of many US electoral laws, the impact of a voluntary voting system on campaigning and the different role of the political parties during the campaign.

I would like to thank the Australian Political Exchange Council for providing me with the opportunity to participate in this study tour to the United States. The trip has provided me with valuable information about election campaign techniques, strengthened my professional interest in US politics and reinforced my confidence in the Australian electoral system.

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