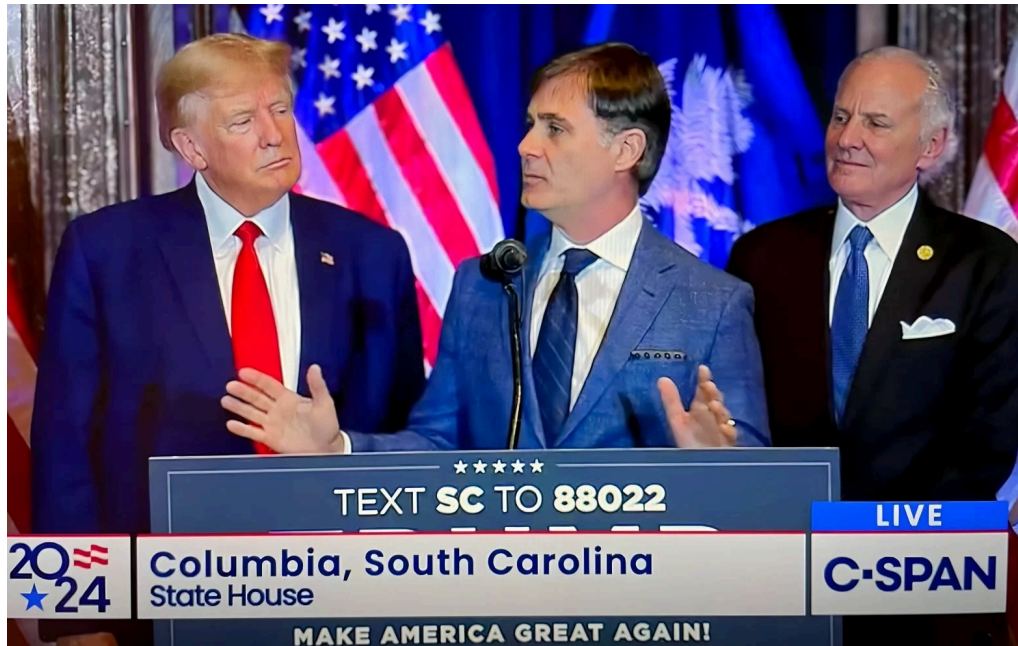


# Former SC Lt. Gov. on Trump, GOP Primary and Why You Shouldn't Pass Up the Chitlin' Strut

February 18, 2024 **by Dan McCue**



Former S.C. Lt. Gov. André Bauer (center) with former President Donald Trump (left) and current S.C. Gov. Henry McMaster (right) at a recent Trump campaign event streamed via CSPAN. (Capture courtesy André Bauer)

CHARLESTON, S.C. — André Bauer still remembers the moment he believes South Carolina became a nominee-maker when it comes to national presidential politics.

“I must have been 11 or 12 at the time and early on, former Texas Gov. John Connally was considered the frontrunner for the Republican presidential nomination,” said Bauer, who served as South Carolina’s lieutenant governor from 2003 to 2011, after a successful career in the state House and Senate.

The year was 1980, and Connally, a former Democrat known to most Americans as the man severely injured by the “magic”

bullet that had passed through President John Kennedy in Dallas, had lined up most of the old-money donors to support his campaign.

Believing Connally was destined to be the nominee, Bauer's father William took his son to a campaign event.

"He was impressive," Bauer said. "I mean, he was this big oil man from Texas who'd been shot in the motorcade with Kennedy, and now here he is, a beloved member of the Republican party."

But what Connally and ultimately William Bauer failed to perceive was that a sea change had occurred within the party.

Four years earlier, former Calif. Gov. Ronald Reagan had challenged incumbent President Gerald Ford for the nomination and had won enough primaries to at least raise the question of the inevitability of Ford's eventual nomination.

When Ford prevailed, however, Reagan responded graciously, and ultimately campaigned on Ford's behalf in 20 states against Democrat Jimmy Carter, who ultimately won the presidency.

The contest left many in the GOP pondering what might have been had Reagan, rather than Ford, gotten the nomination and began a movement in which the party's rank and file would have a greater say in who would be its future nominees.

Following a loss in Iowa in early 1980 to both Reagan and George H.W. Bush, who surpassed expectations and came in first, Connally focused on South Carolina, where he had the support of Sen. Strom Thurmond.

But alas it wasn't to be. Rather than accede to the early choice of the party elites, South Carolina voters handed Reagan a landslide

victory. Spokespeople for both Reagan and Bush declared Connally's days as a viable candidate, numbered.

"Since then, with but one exception, South Carolina has chosen the eventual nominee," Bauer said.

"The one time we didn't get it right was in 2012, when former House Speaker Newt Gingrich won," he said. "Now, he would have done an excellent job as president, but it's the one time in recent memory that we didn't pick the nominee."

"That said, my hashtag for us would be #SouthCarolinaWePickPresidents," he added.

This year, Bauer is playing an active role in the process, serving as a senior advisor to former President Donald Trump's 2024 campaign.

However, before he got to that in a recent conversation with The Well News, he was asked to continue to explain South Carolina to the uninitiated.

"There's a saying here that as South Carolina goes, so goes the country, and I think that's true," Bauer said.

"And the reason is the vast diversity in population and backgrounds here that I think reflects an overview of the country," he said.

Bauer went on to explain that unlike most other states — he pointed to New York and Texas as specific examples — South Carolina's population is constantly being supplemented by newcomers.

"There's no question, for instance, that we're part of the graying of America because retirees are moving here from other areas,"

he said. "At the same time, you've got people of all ages moving here from up and down the coast."

But even without that occurring, Bauer continued, South Carolina has long reflected many different aspects of the modern Republican party.

"For instance, you've got a huge evangelical base here," he explained. "It encompasses the entire Upstate, stretching from Oconee and Picken County to Greenville and Spartanburg and it's an area that's home to institutions like Bob Jones University, a private university known for its conservatism.

"At the same time, you've got a big business climate here too. You've got BMW and Michelin Group and BOSE, so you have got a lot of executives from all over the world coming here. And then you've got Columbia, the capital of South Carolina, which is also a business center.

"And along with all of that, you've got Myrtle Beach and Charleston County, and of course Beaufort County, encompassing Hilton Head, where you have a lot of retirement communities," he said.

But Bauer cautioned that candidates seeking statewide office or a statewide primary victory can focus on those areas at their peril.

"If you ever flew real slow over South Carolina, what you'd see below you would really shock you," said Bauer, a private pilot who is also a lieutenant colonel in the Civil Air Patrol's South Carolina Wing.

"For all that we've done in regard to economic development, there is still a lot of rural country here, and a heck of a lot of agriculture," he said.

And it was those rural counties that made all the difference to Bauer when he ran for lieutenant governor for the first time in 2002.

His main opponent in the Republican primary that year was State Sen. David Thomas, who not only hailed from Greenville, the epicenter of GOP politics in the state, but was also the powerful chairman of the South Carolina Senate's Banking and Insurance Committee.

Bauer came in second to Thomas in the primary, but because none of the candidates got a clear majority, they had to compete against each other again in a runoff election.

"He actually beat me in one county by something like 24,000 votes, which is almost insurmountable in a runoff election," Bauer said.

"But I had gone to Allendale County and Jasper County and Hampton County, all these little counties sprinkled throughout the state that didn't have many votes on their own, but which could cumulatively make a very big difference in the outcome of a race."

Bauer won 33 of the state's 34 smallest counties and with them, the runoff election. He then went on to beat Democratic State Sen. Phil Leventis in the general election with 52% of the vote.

Given his experience, Bauer was asked to go into a bit more detail about the kind of ground game it takes for a candidate to win in South Carolina.

"When I ran for lieutenant governor for the first time, I was only 32 years old, but I had the benefit of knowing a guy named Rod Shealy, who was a protege of Lee Atwater, the famed Republican political consultant.

“Rod, who unfortunately has passed, really was my mentor and offered suggestions about what I should do,” Bauer said. “One was to pull over on the side of the road before Carolina and Clemson football games and stand up in the back of a pickup truck to take questions from folks about where I stood on issues.

“That got me the kind of name ID that other people were spending tons of money to create, and with it, I was able to win the second highest office in the state of South Carolina, independently, twice,” he said.

“In essence, Shealy’s advice was to do unconventional things that get you in front of folks. Go to everything, every small town event that you can. And it was retail politics at its best,” Bauer said.

“So whether it was the Chitlin’ Strut in Salley, or the frog jump in Springfield, the Watermelon Festival in Hampton or the Peach Festival in Gilbert, those are the kind of things you do to make yourself seen and build an organization,” he said.

When it comes to the Trump campaign, senior advisors like Chris LaCivita (“brilliant,” in Bauer’s words) and Jason Miller, a native South Carolinian, understand all this.

“They know South Carolina like dew covers Dixie,” Bauer said.  
“They get it.”

And part of getting it was being receptive to Bauer’s suggestion that the campaign appoint chair people in all 46 of South Carolina’s counties to advise Trump on where he needs to be and serve as his ears on the ground.

“Most people who run for president don’t even know how many countries there are in South Carolina. I said we need to blanket it.

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Andre Bauer says his own political aspirations are pretty much behind him. In addition to his work with the Trump campaign, he recently became a senior advisor to Broadstreet, a private equity firm based in Greenville, S.C.

counties backward and forward,” he said.

As a result, Bauer said, Trump was comfortable in South Carolina from the start, and could speak to the crowds at his rallies, at length, in ways that let them know he understood them and their concerns.

“In a way, it’s what has enabled him to say things that everybody was thinking but nobody was talking about,” he said.

“And this goes all the way back to 2016,” he continued. “I mean, without getting into the names and personalities of people who



were running in the primary that year, I remember other candidates being appalled at some of the things he would discuss.

“Trump understood, based on the information being gathered on the ground, at this county level, that there were things that were happening in this country that went against the grain of what most Americans truly believe the role of government is, where our country should be going and what’s happening around us.

“And it’s not a debate between Republicans and Democrats. I think it’s way beyond that,” he said.

“And Trump was able to see that we were in a situation where the average, hardworking ‘Johnny lunchbucket’ in this country — regardless of the party they identified with — did not like what was going on.

“And the same thing is true today. They don’t like it. They don’t appreciate it. And most of them are not going to vote for it,” he said.

Bauer said the consistency of Trump’s “message,” gleaned from the grassroots of his operation is one reason his poll numbers and performance in primary state after primary state has “kind of ballooned” this year.

“Plus, he’s got a track record of four years as president, following through on the things he said. So when he comes to South Carolina to give a speech, he’s already got a track record with those who come to see him that’s stronger than a garlic milkshake,” he said.

The obvious question then is, is the media somehow missing the Trump story even now, after he’s spent decades in the public eye and almost 10 years on the presidential campaign stage.



Has the coverage of Trump become more about what the talking heads have to say about the latest pull quote or inflammatory remark by the candidate, than what's actually going on at his events?

Brauer considered a moment, then said he does think the media is missing a larger story when it comes to the former president.

"If you watch a rally and if you look at the people that are turning out, the people that wait in line knowing they're very likely to not even get in the building, there's something happening there," he said.

"I mean, I was at his North Charleston event on Valentine's Day, which was held in the convention center there, and he could have easily filled the larger coliseum next door that night," Brauer said.

"But more than that, I believe he could do that every week in South Carolina. Donald Trump could come every week and fill a coliseum-sized venue — and it doesn't matter what part of South Carolina you're talking about," he continued.

To prove his point, Bauer pointed to Trump's return to the large-scale rallies of his past campaigns, an outdoor rally held on Main Street in Pickens, South Carolina, last Fourth of July weekend.

Though the temperatures climbed into the 90s, Trump was nonetheless greeted by an adoring and very loud crowd estimated by the local police chief to be about 55,000 people strong.

Though Bauer put the crowd estimate higher, at about 80,000, he said regardless of the actual number, it far exceeded attendance at any other presidential event up to that time.

“The comparison I make is when then-Sen. Barack Obama came to Columbia, South Carolina, with Oprah Winfrey in tow [in December 2007],” he said.

The event was originally scheduled to be held at the Colonial Center, an 18,000 seat venue not far from the state capitol.

When free tickets “sold out” two days after the joint Obama-Winfrey appearance was announced, the event was moved to Williams-Brice Stadium, home to the South Carolina Gamecocks football team.

The Obama campaign said at the time the move was due to the “overwhelming demand for seating” and that with 80,000 available seats, the stadium would be more accommodating to its needs.

“In the end, however, they didn’t come close to filling Williams-Brice,” Bauer said. “And that was the only time people were going to get to see them together.

“Trump is drawing those kinds of crowds everywhere he goes. Events are getting so overfilled that he’s having to stop and talk to people on the street before he goes inside,” he continued, referring to the former president’s recent rally in Conway, where Trump stopped in a parking lot and addressed about 3,000 people who couldn’t get into his scheduled event.

“There’s a movement here that’s bigger than anybody,” Bauer said. “I mean, this is at the level of Taylor Swift. There just aren’t many people in this country who can do what he’s doing in terms of drawing crowds, and what that tells you is he’s still connecting with people. And I can tell you, from first hand experience, it’s absolutely mesmerizing to watch.”

Though Bauer refrains from discussing Nikki Haley directly — she defeated him in the Republican primary ahead of South Carolina's 2010 gubernatorial election, and he believes any critique of her would be viewed as “sour grapes” — he says the sheer magnitude of Trump's support has made him virtually impervious to all-comers.

“I mean, tens of millions of dollars are pouring into this contest, she's someone who has twice been elected governor of our state ... and yet despite her mailings — one of which I got the other day — the text messages and personal appearances, her [poll] numbers are going backwards. Think about that.

“And again, I'm not criticizing any other candidate, I'm just saying, look what's going on with Trump. It's remarkable,” he said.

Trying to reframe the question, Bauer likened the former president to McDonald's and those who have run against him this election cycle to a hypothetical “company X” that's trying to cut into its local market share.

“I don't care what hamburger it is ... it could be Sonic, it could be Johnny's ... but if they keep mailing you coupons and stuff, eventually, you'll probably give them a try and McDonald's will lose some market share.

“With Donald Trump here in South Carolina, just the opposite is happening. It almost seems as if the more another campaign sends out, the higher his numbers go,” he said.

Given his long history as a Trump supporter, it would be easy for one to assume that Bauer must have been with the former president from the beginning. In reality, that's not the case.

After his gubernatorial hopes were dashed, Bauer signed on with CNN and for three years served as a political commentator for the news network.

When he eventually did lean back into politics, Bauer did so to support his longtime friend, former Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee, who was making a second bid for the White House in 2016.

"I can remember, it must have been February 2015, when I met with Trump before he was ever a candidate. He had come to The Citadel in Charleston for a dinner that happened to coincide with the weekend of the Daytona 500, which I'd attended.

"So I drove back early and we met, but I am loyal to the core and I said, my good friend Mike is running and I'm going to lend him my support," Bauer said.

Huckabee and Bauer had become friends when both were lieutenant governors of their respective states.

"And we both knew well what it felt like to be a lieutenant governor," Bauer said. "Like a spare tire, you're kept in the dark, but you're all pumped up and ready to go just in case you're needed.

"Well, Mike Huckabee asked if I'd go to Iowa with him and open for him at various speaking engagements, and it quickly became clear he wasn't gaining any traction. It was just one of those things.

"At the same, this is now late January 2016, Trump and Fox News are arguing over the network's choice of Megyn Kelly as moderator of the last debate before the Iowa Caucuses that year. Ultimately, Trump decided not to participate. He'd hold his own event that night," Bauer said.

“So Trump holds this counter debate event at a local university — I don’t remember the name of it — and invites Huckabee to go,” he continued. “We show up and we listen to him speak, and shortly afterwards Mike and I have a heart-to-heart and one of us said, ‘This campaign — the Huckabee campaign — is going to end here in Iowa.’ We both knew it. And I said, ‘Well, what are you going to do?’ And he said, ‘I’m going to support Trump.’ And I said, ‘You know, I feel the same way. He’s what we need at this time.’

“So once I got back home I reached out to the Trump campaign, I met with him ahead of an appearance in Myrtle Beach, I endorsed him and I have supported him ever since,” he said.

Asked if Trump’s 91 indictments and host of current legal problems give him any pause at all, Bauer said he’s got a bigger concern.

“The weaponization of government agencies. The weaponization of the court system. And I am petrified because if this can happen to a former president, it can happen any time to any other American citizen,” Bauer said.

“I am scared to death when the government starts abusing its power, and I’ve seen it happen on the city level, the county level, the state level and worst of all now, at the federal level,” he said.

“I referred to something earlier as not being a Republican or a Democratic issue, and to me, as an American, this isn’t an issue that pertains only to Donald Trump. What we’re seeing today goes against the grain of why my forefathers fought to protect the institutions of our country.

“And what’s particularly disheartening to me is that now, as a father, I believe we’ll get through this, but what kind of country

will my children live in?" he said.

"I worry about the fate of a country where the news media, which is given special rights in our Constitution, isn't appalled by what's going on and calling out people for the weaponization of agencies that we see taking place. I mean the reason the founding fathers gave the news media the rights and protection that other people don't get under the constitution is so that it could expose corrupt behavior in government.

"So it's more than being concerned with what these prosecutions will mean to the presidential election. I'm scared about where the country is going. I'm scared when folks in office will stop at nothing to get elected.

"So I'm absolutely concerned, while at the same time I believe this too shall pass," Bauer said. "The question is, where do we go as a country, when people aren't up in arms, and the media is not up in arms and the business community is not up in arms about what we've seen happening.

"Will Trump get through it? I think it's clear all these events are making his poll numbers even better. And he's bringing more people on; people, incidentally, who are scared just like me. So he's going to get through it. The question is, how?"

Though Bauer obviously would not go into detail about the Trump campaign's get-out-the-vote effort ahead of the Feb. 24 primary, he said "there's a lot going on behind the scenes" and "it's very organized."

"Jason Miller, Chris LaCivita, [Trump South Carolina state director] Austin McCubbin and [director of special projects] Justin Evans have worked tirelessly to put together a team of volunteers that's blanketed the state of South Carolina.

“Like I said earlier, we’ve got chair people and full-blown operations in all 46 counties ... and they’re going to have an impact that’s beyond belief,” he said.

Somewhat surprisingly given his insider role and the clear excitement he feels about the prospect of another Trump presidency, Bauer said he doesn’t expect to be part of that administration should it come to pass.

“No, I don’t think so,” he said. “I mean, you never want to say never, but I’ve got a 4-year-old at home now and I’m loving life, and I just had a private equity company bring me on board. So it just seems like that’s not the direction I’m heading in right now.”

Bauer said he was “fortunate enough and flattered” that Trump considered him for an ambassadorship during his last administration, and was gratified when “folks called and offered their support if I would run for Congress this year.”

“It just wasn’t my dream anymore. In 2012, it was my dream. But that dream has come and gone and my priorities are different today.”

In 2018, Bauer married Myrtle Beach real estate agent Meredith Carter, with whom he has a son, André Wesley Bauer. As a result of the marriage, he also has one stepdaughter and twin stepsons.

“So would I rule out something completely? No. I would at least entertain doing something that enabled me to be engaged in trying to improve my state and my country, but I’m not searching for anything,” he said.

“We’re living up in the mountains, near the North Carolina/South Carolina line, and having been the product of a



home where my parents divorced, I'm spending as much time with my kids as I can.

"At the same time, my dad now has Alzheimer's Disease, and so I'm trying to spend a little bit more time with him as well."

"The funny thing is, I'm about to turn 55 next month, and your priorities really do change," Bauer said. "I'm still a true patriot and I love the thought of sacrifice, but at the same time, I know I've four children at home and I have the ability to heavily influence where they go in their lives, what they do, and what's important to them. So that is a big thing for me."

With that, Bauer's thoughts turned back to Trump and his recent appearance in North Charleston, an appearance that happened to be less than a mile from the former site of Bauer's grandparents' home.

"They built their dream home in the 1960s on a dirt road at what is now the intersection of Dorchester Road and Montague Avenue," he said. "When I was young, I spent nearly every weekend there.

"They were just good, hard-working people. My grandfather worked at the nearby Charleston Navy Yard, and never would they have imagined that just a generation later the president of the United States would know someone in their family on a first-name basis," he continued.

"You know, when I saw the president the other day in North Charleston, I said, 'You know, we're all praying for you,'" Bauer said. "And while I used a little more colorful language than I'm using here, because I wanted him to remember what I was trying to get across, I said I truly admire how you're handling all the things you're having to handle right now.

"I said, 'You know, I couldn't take on the pressure you're having to handle, taking on x, y and z,' and a lot of people, myself included, admire the fact that you don't back down.'

"Now, I know there are folks for whom Trump is a nonstarter. I know some of them personally," Bauer said. "They don't like him for this or that or something he's said, but my view is you don't have to agree with somebody every time, in every instance, if they have the right intentions and are trying to move in a positive direction.

"Personally, if I can agree with an elected official 80% of the time, that's more than I have a right to expect. People aren't going to agree on every topic," he said.

"We've talked a lot about why people are drawn to Trump, but one thing we didn't mention is how people my age and a little older and a little younger, feel about the world and the nation we're living in.

"They might not have time to go to rallies or get involved or call themselves a member of one political party or another, but what they do know is the country has changed drastically from the one they grew up in in the 1970s and 1980s, and that things have changed drastically for the worse in the last three years.

"It's almost beyond belief, but [Netflix's] 'House of Cards' ain't got nothing on what's happening in D.C. today," Bauer said.

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**Who was considered the frontrunner for the Republican presidential nomination in 1980?**

John F. Kennedy