

# Machiavelli's Shadow

The Rise and Fall  
of

# Karl Rove



Paul Alexander

Austin. Even though they would both deny it, members of the Texas political community would believe that for many of the 12 years Rampton was based in Austin, he and Rove worked in tandem to take down Democrats, each advancing his own career by collaborating with the other.



The first known Democratic victim of Greg Rampton was Vic Feazell. The strange episode involving Feazell began with the case of Henry Lee Lucas, a convicted murderer who, in 1983, after serving his time in Michigan for killing his mother, was arrested by the Texas Rangers on a firearms violation. However, once in the custody of the Rangers, he was charged with the murders of an elderly woman and an acquaintance of his. Subjected to brutal treatment by the Rangers, Lucas confessed to the murders to improve his living conditions in jail, or so he later claimed. Once he was incarcerated, the confessions kept coming, supposedly because, again according to Lucas, the more murder cases he confessed to, the better his living conditions became.

Before long, the Henry Lee Lucas Task Force was set up by the Texas Rangers just to process what was turning into a steady string of confessions to unsolved murders committed across the country. Tens of murders soon became hundreds. The number of confessions Lucas ultimately made is generally believed to total 350, although some crime experts contend that Texas authorities processed his confessions to as many as 3,000 unsolved cases. Lucas was being flown around the country to crime scenes to confess to murders he claimed to have committed years before. If he had committed even a fraction of the murders he confessed to, he would have been the worst serial killer in history. There was only one problem. He had confessed to murders he could not possibly have committed, such as a 1979 murder in Oklahoma he claimed he carried out despite irrefutable

medical records indicating that at the time of the crime he had been confined to a hospital in West Virginia, almost 1,000 miles away. Finally, local officials in Texas became dubious. There were just too many murders, and too much of the evidence didn't add up. The first official to take action was Vic Feazell, the district attorney of Waco, Texas.

Feazell had received information from reliable sources calling into question Lucas's confessions to three murders in Feazell's jurisdiction, McLennan County. Apparently, Lucas had not even been in McLennan County when the murders occurred. After a government employee tipped off the Texas Rangers that Feazell might air his doubts about the validity of some of Lucas's confessions—a move that would be embarrassing to the Texas Rangers—the Rangers initiated a widespread investigation of Feazell, complete with help from FBI agent Greg Rampton.<sup>2</sup>

Feazell called Lucas, who was in jail near Austin, to Waco to appear before a grand jury in an effort to prove that he might not have committed all of the murders. Feazell used the same grand jury to begin examining the actions of the Texas Rangers' Henry Lee Lucas Task Force. In April 1985, the story of Lucas's hoaxes broke, tarnishing the reputation of the Texas Rangers and reflecting negatively on several other government agencies. At the same time, Feazell came under attack, becoming the subject of a vicious, all-out assault on him, his private life, and his office. His phones were tapped, his bank records were subpoenaed by federal officials, his mail was opened illegally. The investigation of Feazell combined the efforts of the FBI, local law enforcement, and the US Attorney's Office. A grand jury handed down a multiple-count indictment charging him with bribery, and Feazell was arrested on the morning of September 17, 1985, when he showed up for work at the courthouse. The local news media had even been alerted so they could broadcast his "perp walk" on live television.

"When the feds arrested me at the courthouse," Feazell says, "another

group descended on a restaurant where my wife and four-year-old son were eating breakfast. Rampton was there and appeared to be in charge of the group. They took them out of the restaurant and made them ride back to our house in the back seat of one of the FBI cars. Rampton was in charge of the search of my house. There were at least 12 agents there, my wife later told me. They unwrapped everything in the freezer, emptied all the drawers, went through our son's toys, dug up our flower garden, and raked the insulation in the attic. They took a toy syringe from a play doctor's kit in my son's room and listed it on the search warrant return as 'drug paraphernalia.'

"Rampton made my wife and son sit on the couch in the living room. My wife turned on the TV to take my son's mind off of what was going on. As she did, regular programming was interrupted to show live coverage of me being arrested. My four-year-old son suffered emotional trauma as a result of this. To him, the bad men with guns had come to get him and they had taken his daddy to jail."<sup>3</sup>

While the Texas political establishment—of which Rove was a member—watched this drama play out not just in Waco but across the state, any interested observer could see how effectively a politician can be destroyed by the combined forces of the government, especially if an FBI agent and a US attorney are willing to collaborate in the takedown. In Feazell's case, the efforts of government officials were aided considerably by the local media outlets. Channel 8 in Dallas, WFAA, carried the perp walk live and then aired 11 reports on Feazell as he was being investigated.

The charges against Feazell centered on a claim that, as district attorney, he had taken cash bribes from attorneys for not prosecuting their clients who had been arrested for drunk driving. There was only one hitch: None of the claims was true. In June 1987, following a five-week trial that saw the government call 65 witnesses, it took the jury just six hours to find Feazell innocent. Then, in an effort to clear his name,

Fezell sued WFAA, the television station that had broadcast the news stories about him being investigated by the FBI and other government agencies. Fezell argued that the indictments brought against him had been bolstered by the television stories, which, he claimed, contained libelous material—the charge that Fezell and one of his associates were “strong-arming” lawyers and their clients for bribes in exchange for dropping drunk-driving charges. “I had to prove everything they were saying about me was a lie,” Fezell says, “and not only a lie but, because I was a public figure, I had to prove it was said with malice” to meet the legal definition of libel.<sup>4</sup> A jury agreed with Fezell and awarded him \$58 million—the largest jury award in a libel case in American history. Eventually, Fezell settled for a smaller amount—rumored to be about \$20 million.

“Vic Fezell was indicted because he was a high-powered Democratic district attorney in Waco,” says Garry Mauro, the state’s land commissioner from 1983 until 1999. “Fezell was a Christian Coalition Democrat, which was scaring the shit out of Rove. He was even a preacher. So Rampton and a Channel 8 reporter teamed up and ran the most salacious TV and *Dallas Morning News* stories. He had two lawyers in Waco who gave him a \$1,000 contribution each and they tried to prove that one of their clients got off [on a charge of] DWI because Fezell was given a contribution. They indicted Fezell and in the trial the two lawyers said, ‘Yes, we gave money but we didn’t get any special treatment.’ He was found not guilty.”<sup>5</sup>

This much was true: During 1985 and 1986, when Greg Rampton was attempting to ruin Fezell, Rampton had caught the attention of Karl Rove. “Rampton had been a lead investigator out of the Austin FBI office in a legislative sting operation called BriLab,” James Moore, journalist and co-author of *Bush’s Brain*, would say. “Since Democrats held almost every office at that time, they were his targets. . . . Rove knew Rampton by reputation.”<sup>6</sup> No doubt Rove had realized he could use Rampton’s

I got on an airplane to go to Houston to the convention and when I landed I had 100 cameras wanting to talk to me about my subpoena.

“With Vic Feazell, Rampton tried to prove if you gave a political contribution you got favored treatment. That’s what they were trying to prove with me too. They subpoenaed all my documents because they were going to prove if you gave Garry Mauro a political contribution your loan would be approved and you’d be closed faster. They put all my information on a computer and did a retrograde analysis and all they proved was you didn’t get special treatment. I gave *everyone* special treatment. They proved that and they never issued a statement.”<sup>15</sup>

While Rampton was continuing his investigations, Rove was engaging in his own fights. “In 1984,” says Tom Pauken, a player in Texas Republican politics in the 1980s, “I had broken with George H. W. Bush. I had been a fan of his both in terms of Reagan’s selection of him as vice president and in terms of knowing him since the mid-1960s, when I was national chairman of the College Republicans. I stayed in touch all through the 1970s. I had a good relationship [with him] during the first term of the Reagan administration. But I finally broke with Bush and James Baker in 1984 when I was dispatched by the White House to the Rio Grande Valley to deal with some problems down there. It was a sensitive assignment and we were having some success and Baker tried to pull the trigger on me. I didn’t like the way these guys did business. So I broke with the Bush family.

“Then, in 1988, I supported Bob Dole and that’s when Karl took some shots at me. At that time George W. got all upset and yelled at me at the state convention. ‘How dare you do this after all my father has done for you!’ It was that Bush loyalty thing. It’s a one-way street, sort of like loyalty to the king. You’re expected to be loyal. And, no, Bush hadn’t really done that much for me except to be friendly. I wasn’t in the club and I didn’t want to be in it. But I did what I did and that was the burning of the bridge, if you will.”<sup>16</sup>