

SECTION

M



Los Angeles Times

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 22, 2002

COMMENTARY AND ANALYSIS

# OPINION

## Don't Snicker . . . Bill Simon Could Actually Win

By SHAWN STEEL

**I** predict Bill Simon Jr. will defeat Gray Davis. Such a statement crashes, Scud-like, directly into the bunker of California's chattering-class consensus, and the reader may understandably be tempted to dismiss it as blind partisan cheerleading or just plain contrariness.

But I think Simon will win based on empirical indicators, not just partisan hopes. Granted, the Simon campaign thus far has not been a case study in effectiveness, but the fact that his candidacy has been administered the last rites almost daily for months, while rudely refusing to die, counterintuitively suggests Simon will trump the media prognosticators and win.

Simon has been hammered by a nonstop torrent of negative media coverage and TV attack ads since the spring. Richard Riordan's once-formidable candidacy—also characterized as confused and badly run—imploded under a less severe and sustained pounding. Yet amazingly, in poll after poll, Simon remains well within striking dis-

tance of Davis.

A Field Poll survey released in July had Simon down just seven points. Two months later, following Simon's worst month mediawise, he was still seven points behind Davis. This defies the conventional rules of politics and is a tribute to Davis' deep, persistent weakness—a story the media neglect in their obsession with the Simon campaign's real and imagined mis-

steps. Davis' unpopularity is no mystery. He inherited a booming economy and overflowing state coffers, which he has mismanaged into a sluggish economy and a \$24-billion deficit. He failed to deal with the electricity crisis everyone else saw coming, acting when it was too late by signing panicky contracts locking us into historically high electricity rates and burdening us with billions in debt. Policymaking has become a political Ebay for special interests that secure favorable decisions that are not so coincidentally timed to large campaign contributions.

The imperious, intemperate Davis is simply disliked by Californians—Democrats as well as Repub-

licans and independents. Davis is banking on the mountain of campaign cash he has squeezed from every special interest to insulate him from all that and buy him a second term. But in politics, as in life, money isn't everything—a lesson Davis imparted to "Checkbook" Al Checchi and Jane Harman in 1998.

Since spring, Davis has spent millions attacking Simon on television, with relatively little impact on Simon's popularity. He's also spent millions on ads talking about what a great governor he is, and his popularity rating is worse than ever.

Voters want an alternative to Davis. They overwhelmingly believe the state is heading in the wrong direction, and they have no reason to think Davis can or will turn things around.

Meanwhile, events have provided Simon with a fresh start as the campaign enters its critical final phase.

The groundless fraud verdict—which had been hanging over Simon's campaign like a nightmare—has been tossed out, depriving Davis of one of his principal clubs for

pummeling Simon.

Simon's campaign has finally made full disclosure of the candidate's tax returns, putting another distraction behind it. These developments, combined with Simon's decision to pour \$4 million of his own money into the campaign, will boost fund-raising and ensure that his campaign can fund a sustained ad campaign in the final weeks.

And it is those final weeks, when voters will really begin focusing on the race, that matter most. If Simon can stay on the offensive and relentlessly remind voters of Davis' miserable record and the worsened condition of the state, he will close the gap and win in November.

Many an overconfident incumbent has fumbled away victory to a lean and hungry challenger. Davis knows this from his own experience, having defied the predictions of pundits to beat two vastly better-funded primary opponents and then defeat a much better-funded Dan Lungren. I'm sure the governor is hoping history doesn't repeat itself.

*Shawn Steel is chairman of the California Republican Party.*