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Is the Terminator in Free-Fall?

by MARC COOPER

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Anaheim, California

As Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger was readying himself to address the featured luncheon at the GOP state convention held in mid-September in a Disneyland-area hotel, the assembled Republican troops were atwitter. Last-minute sales of conservative paraphernalia outside the doors of the ballroom where the governor would speak were brisk. T-shirts of George W. Bush in his now infamous flight suit sold alongside bumper stickers reading LIBERALISM IS A MENTAL DISORDER and GUN CONTROL IS A STEADY HAND.

When the tanned and beaming Governorator finally appeared onstage, he was received like, well, a world-famous movie star--the nearly 500 guests rose to their feet and cheered loudly and repeatedly. There wasn't much suspense in Schwarzenegger's brief address. The day before, he'd announced he was running for re-election, a full fourteen months before next year's vote. And he'd been making headlines for months by calling for a special election on November 8 and supporting three measures that would enhance his budget authority, extend probation for new teachers and impose a new way to redraw electoral districts.

But the governor did throw out one big newsmaker to the crowd and the attendant media. Vowing to confront the "union bosses that run the state," he officially endorsed a fourth measure, Proposition 75, a so-called "paycheck protection" initiative that would severely curtail the ability of state public-employee unions to make large political donations. "Big government unions should not use members' funds as a personal kitty," he said to roaring approval. "Union bosses have too much power over members' paychecks and too much power over our state."

As the delegates chanted "Four more years! Four more years!" USC political analyst Sherry Bebitch Jeffe whispered to me: "We have just moved from all-out war to Armageddon."

Indeed, by coming out for the antilabor measure, Schwarzenegger has guaranteed that the special election will be a nationalized free-for-all. With union contributions the veritable lifeblood of the California Democratic Party, the election promises to be an astronomically expensive political food-fight, a do-or-die referendum on the governor himself. Schwarzenegger is scrambling to add another \$20 million, including as much as \$5 million of his own money, to the \$30 million he has already collected

and spent. An alliance of California labor unions has raised more than \$60 million. Big Pharma is expected to spend \$80 million defending one of its own favored initiatives--countering a competing initiative that would provide low-cost prescription drugs--in the special election. The cost of the voting itself has been estimated to be between \$45 million and \$80 million.

The blinding golden glare off these stacks of cash illuminates the fix that California's once wildly popular governor now finds himself in. His 2003 recall-election campaign triumphantly culminated on the steps of the Sacramento Capitol with 10,000 supporters, many waving brooms in the air. This new outsider governor would sweep away politics-as-usual, send the special interests packing and inaugurate an era of populist bipartisan reform.

Two years later Schwarzenegger has raised more corporate cash than any previous California governor. He finds himself persistently dogged by union-led demonstrators as he campaigns full-time for a special election that 60 percent of voters say is unnecessary, and for a highly partisan agenda that, like him, is failing in the polls. No wonder Schwarzenegger's favorability rating now slumps at a miserable 35 percent, an anemic half of its high point two years ago.

Earlier this year, in a scenario that's become routine, Schwarzenegger's commencement address at his alma mater, Santa Monica College, was drowned out by a half-hour of jeering. The hero's reception at the state Republican convention was an exception to what's become the rule. Increasingly, the only friendly crowds he's finding are partisan and handpicked.

"Arnold is burning his ships with no way back," attorney Shawn Steel, a former chair of the state GOP, told me jubilantly after Schwarzenegger completed his Anaheim speech endorsing Prop 75. "He's put everything on the table. And it's wonderful!"

It's also the problem for Schwarzenegger. The worst place a statewide California Republican can find himself in is hostage to the party base--a constituency that amounts to about a third of the state's voters. Schwarzenegger claims he remains "bloody but unbowed" from this past season of political warfare, and he vows he's now battling to "reform the entire system." But at best he is now fighting, uphill, for his mere political survival.

"His whole operation failed to learn the lessons of the recall election," says veteran Democratic strategist Bill Carrick. "As long as voters thought he was some sort of different, progressive Republican, different from the Beltway Republicans, as long as he was pro-environment, pro-gay and so on, he was riding high. But now that he's veered into inheriting the old worn-out Republican agenda, he's in deep trouble."

The Good Arnold

It didn't have to be this way. For a brief historical moment, at least, it seemed as though Schwarzenegger was going to scramble the state's partisan lines and reorder Sacramento politics.

Heading into next month's special election, it's clear that that moment has passed. The governor has spent much of 2005 scurrying to shore up the red-meat Republican base. He vetoed a gay marriage bill, a raise in the minimum wage and a measure that would have given driver's licenses to the undocumented. He's also favoring a parental-notification abortion initiative.

But simply writing Schwarzenegger off as "Pete Wilson with a smile" or one more run-of-the-mill "Bush Republican"--as some of his critics have--is as mistaken as suggesting that his dour pay-to-play predecessor, Gray Davis, was somehow a progressive. Little more than a year ago, some of California's

most powerful unions sent their members into the state capitol to lobby for Schwarzenegger's renegotiated compacts with Indian tribes, which made union recognition a make-or-break issue. "Arnold walked the walk," an organizer for the hotel workers' union, told me at the time. "Other governors," she said, referring to Gray Davis, "merely talked the talk."

Schwarzenegger has also supported pro-farmworker measures that Davis and his predecessors had left to languish. He has taken a decidedly more liberal position than Davis on criminal sentencing and correctional reform. And even as he vetoed the gay marriage bill a few weeks ago, he signed four other measures that strengthened civil unions.

Forty percent of Schwarzenegger's judicial nominees have been Democrats. Four of his twelve Cabinet secretaries are also Democrats; one is an independent. And while some of his more recent moves have angered the green lobby, the governor named a prominent environmentalist to head the California EPA, fought for expanded solar power and successfully championed a global-warming measure that went far beyond the provisions of the Kyoto Protocol. Schwarzenegger and the overwhelmingly Democratic state legislature wound up jointly supporting several budget-balancing measures and workers' compensation reform.

But even while those measures were sailing to passage last year, the governor made it clear that he'd be willing to use his soaring popularity and go directly to the voters in a referendum if the compromises didn't continue.

The Bad Arnold

All the bipartisan good vibes came to a crashing halt at the beginning of this year. In a blustering, swaggering State of the State speech, Arnold unveiled his so-called Year of Reform agenda and issued what sounded like an ultimatum to the legislative Democrats: either rubber-stamp it or face a special election, which he could easily win.

That he had recently called these same legislators "Girlie Men" didn't help. Nor did his new agenda, which demanded approval of measures that would roll back pensions of state employees, extend the probationary period of teachers under the guise of educational reform and give Arnold more budget authority over the legislature. His proposal to transfer redistricting power from lawmakers to a panel of retired judges--a worthy notion that at least edges away from partisan gerrymandering--ticked off Republicans as well as Democrats.

After spending his first year virtually unopposed, the governor ran into immediate political gunfire. His pension reform proposal was so poorly drafted that it denied benefits to police widows; Schwarzenegger was forced to withdraw that measure quickly. Then he bumbled right into an unanticipated war. California nurses were angered by his opposition to lowering patient-to-nurse ratios, and they protested loudly. The governor returned the favor early this year, saying publicly of the nurses that he was "kicking their butts." The California Nurses Association began infiltrating his fundraising events and booing him.

All of a sudden the anti-Arnold movement caught fire. Tens of millions of dollars in labor-funded commercials derided Schwarzenegger's reform agenda as heartless and cast the governor as a man who went back on his promises. The spots, featuring a perplexed fireman, police officer or teacher, ended with the tag line, "Not the governor we thought you'd be."

"He made a lot of rookie mistakes," says Los Angeles Republican consultant Allan Hoffenblum. "You

can't attack the public-employee unions in this state without looking like you're attacking nurses, teachers and cops--people that Californians have warm feelings about."

The Ugly Arnold

Under the relentless attacks, Team Arnold--the political operation around the governor--seemed to evaporate this spring as quickly as his popularity ratings declined. Longtime Sacramento watchers could no longer figure out who was in charge as the governor's office fell into a political abyss. And Schwarzenegger kept digging himself in deeper, railing at public employees as "special interests"--a laughable notion--as he traveled nationwide raising corporate money for his special election.

In an act of cold desperation trying to raise sagging poll numbers, Schwarzenegger briefly jumped into bed with the anti-immigrant Minutemen. The romance lasted only one news cycle, but its deadly aftereffects are still taking their toll. Arnold's once-significant popularity among Latino voters has been obliterated.

"The governor allowed himself to become the vessel for the interests of his staff and his political consultants," says Scott Schmidt, an activist with the Log Cabin Republicans and a continuing supporter of Schwarzenegger. "His mistake has been to have the public perception that this is Pete Wilson's third term. When he got into trouble this year, first thing he did was turn to immigration. That wasn't the Arnold Schwarzenegger we knew."

Meanwhile, ugly conflicts of interest--which had occasionally bobbed to the surface--erupted into public view. The *Los Angeles Times*, expanding on reporting done by *Slate*, ran stories on the governor's cozy relationship with American Media Inc., owners of the *National Enquirer* and several body-building magazines. On the eve of being sworn into office, Schwarzenegger had signed a lucrative editorial-consulting contract with AMI--odd enough for a governor. But as the *LA Times* revealed in full detail this past summer, AMI was apparently paying out hush money to people with embarrassing or damaging stories to tell about Arnold. "We were protecting him," said a former American Media exec. The governor severed his contract with the tabloid company. But the damage had been done. Polling over the summer showed that as his popularity sank, so did support for his ballot measures.

More than one political operative close to Schwarzenegger said over the summer that the governor was ready to make a deal with the Democratic legislature to call off the November 8 balloting. There were some last-minute marathon negotiations in August with the Democratic leadership. In the end, neither side blinked. The more ideological faction of the governor's staff, urging a confrontation, prevailed. Meanwhile, the Democratic legislature, recognizing that the multimillion-dollar television onslaught against Schwarzenegger was panning out to be one of the most successful in recent history, saw little reason to bail him out with a compromise. The special election that virtually no one had asked for, and few supported, was on.

"I think some of Arnold's staff drank the Kool-Aid that he could win anything he brought directly before the voters," says Democratic consultant Carrick. "And it's wrong to think that it's just Arnold's unpopularity that is dragging down these propositions. It's their actual substance. Voters look at them and say, 'What's this got to do with anything?'"

He'll Be Back--or Will He?

The three ballot measures that Schwarzenegger has endorsed all along are lagging in the polls. That bodes ill for Arnold's Year of Reform, since California propositions typically lose strength toward

election day. The parental-notification initiative is a close call, though, and union officials express growing worry that with balloting by mail already under way, and unions having been slow to educate their members about the consequences of Arnold's antiunion initiative, "paycheck protection" might be headed for passage.

"One of two things is going to happen," says Republican consultant Hoffenblum. "First scenario is this election degenerates into a fight between both party bases, a contest over who can turn out the most hard-core supporters." With the Democrats' sizable edge in party affiliation, that scenario would be grim for Schwarzenegger. "Second scenario is that Arnold is able to motivate some soft Democrats and independents by persuading them that redistricting and taking power away from the legislature are important issues." But that, says Hoffenblum, will be "very, very difficult" for the governor to pull off.

You'd think this sort of Republican gloominess would brighten the hearts of California Democrats. And you'd be right. But only in the short run. A recall effort, launched in October, is unlikely to get anywhere. And while the smart money figures on Schwarzenegger getting whipped in his own special election next month, most observers on both sides--at least in private--concede he's still the odds-on favorite for re-election a year from now.

The two declared Democratic candidates, State Controller Steve Westly and State Treasurer Phil Angelides, have little name recognition in populous Southern California. Westly is a wealthy Silicon Valley entrepreneur, and Angelides is a wealthy Northern California developer. Further complicating matters, the centrist Westly, a former eBay executive, is seen by many liberals as being too pro-business; Angelides's Bay Area liberalism might get in the way of attracting swing voters.

Little surprise, then, that so far Schwarzenegger's strongest Democratic critic has been his Hollywood compadre Warren Beatty. Sounding a tad like his movie character Jay Bulworth, Beatty has in the past few months verbally trounced Arnold in university and union venues, arguing that the governor "misled" Californians with his initial moderate pitch.

Beatty, whose political activism dates back to the 1960s, is an unlikely long shot to actually run against Schwarzenegger. But he told me he's not completely ruling it out. "Being as meticulously truthful as possible," Beatty said, "I'm saying I don't want to run for governor. But I do believe in public service, in giving back. We have two good men out there who have announced their intention to run against Arnold. But I don't close the door."

Actor-director Rob Reiner has also recently been refloated as a possible Democratic challenger. But Beatty and Reiner both have to be aware that if Arnold rose to power by celebrity, it is that same celebrity that is also doing him in. "He came in with a lot of theater," Beatty told me. "But theater isn't enough."

Schwarzenegger's action-hero promises to be an un-politician were accepted by voters who believed that only someone with superhuman status could come through. Those promises raised initial voter expectations to Himalayan heights. The ensuing disappointment and disenchantment with him has fallen into equally deep crevasses.

Even if Arnold survives next month's balloting and goes on to win next year's re-election, it's not uncharitable to say that he has nevertheless already lost. If he wins another term, it will be not as an extraordinary vehicle of hope and reform but rather as an oil-burning jalopy of politics-as-usual. It will be re-election not of the beloved onscreen Terminator but of the human Arnold, one more mediocre Republican governor beholden to powerful and partisan special interests.