

# Los Angeles Times

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WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 7, 2005

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## Governor Faces Revolt in GOP

As anger rises over the choice of a Democrat as chief of staff, party leaders demand a talk.

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SACRAMENTO — With segments of Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's political base rising in revolt, directors of the California Republican Party have demanded a private meeting with the governor to complain about the hiring of a Democratic operative as his chief of staff.

The request comes as Schwarzenegger faces sustained opposition from moderate and conservative Republicans over the choice of Susan P. Kennedy. Before serving as a state public utility commissioner, Kennedy was Cabinet secretary for Gov. Gray Davis. She also was an abortion-rights activist and former Democratic Party executive.

In appointing Kennedy last week, Schwarzenegger praised her as an effective administrator who could "implement my vision" and work cooperatively with Democrats who control the Legislature.

But Republican operatives said grass-roots volunteers were so disturbed by the appointment that they were threatening to abandon Schwarzenegger during his reelection bid next year. Others said Schwarzenegger was risking a nasty fight that could cause the party to rescind its endorsement of him during February's convention in San Jose.

There is even a movement to draft Mel Gibson, the actor and director, to run against Schwarzenegger in the Republican primary next year — in part because the success of Gibson's movie, "The Passion of the Christ," could help his chances among religious conservatives. Raised in Australia, Gibson was born in New York and is a U.S. citizen, although he has not expressed an interest in elected

politics.

"We need to have a good back-up," said Mike Spence, president of the California Republican Assembly, a grass-roots organization that is separate from the state party. Spence's group has set up the website, [www.melgibsonforgovernor.com](http://www.melgibsonforgovernor.com). "He seems to be more consistent with the Republican message" than the governor is, Spence said.

Gibson could not be reached.

His spokesman, who was traveling Tuesday, did not return an e-mail and a call for comment.

The face-to-face meeting between the governor and Republican Party officials is expected to occur next week. That would follow another closed-door meeting that Schwarzenegger has scheduled with GOP lawmakers to allay their concerns.

Former Republican Gov. Pete Wilson, still an admired figure in his party, told The Times that Kennedy "will make a good chief of staff."

But lawmakers from moderate to conservative have questioned Kennedy's appointment. It was criticized by Assembly Republican leader Kevin McCarthy of Bakersfield and Senate Republican leader Dick Ackerman

of Irvine — both important allies of the governor. McCarthy called it a "tragic step backward."

High-ranking Republicans are particularly worried about Kennedy getting inside information about their statewide election efforts next year.

A top aide to Schwarzenegger — longtime Republican Mindy Fletcher — represents the governor on the state party's board of directors.

As deputy chief of staff, Fletcher would report to Kennedy. Fletcher attends private meetings where Republican political strategy is discussed. At the closed-door meeting with Schwarzenegger, party directors are expected to ask the governor: What would Kennedy do with political information she receives?

"What does it mean to have a chief of staff from the other party

during a year of reelection?" asked state Republican Party Chairman Duf Sundheim. "This is one of the reasons we wanted to sit down, to express these concerns."

Kennedy could not be reached for comment.

Margita Thompson, the administration's spokeswoman, said Kennedy and all of the governor's employees "will do what is in the governor's best interest and what is in the state's best interest." She said the governor "looks forward to listening" to GOP officials at the meeting.

For many conservative Republicans, Kennedy's appointment has become the final proof that Schwarzenegger does not represent their interests. The outcry has been loud enough that the Republican Party sent out a special e-mail Monday assuring them that the party was dealing with "the political, philosophical and practical concerns" of the appointment.

The 18-member board of directors of the California Republican Party demanded the private meeting because it "strongly disagrees" with Kennedy's appointment, according to the e-mail. It would be the first-ever meeting of the GOP board and Schwarzenegger over a policy dispute.

"The trouble with celebrities or major politicians is they, by necessity, live in an insular world and their information is limited or distorted," said Shawn Steel, the former state GOP chairman and current member of the party's board of directors. "It's clear Schwarzenegger has been given bad advice."

Administration officials cite other high-ranking Democrats who have worked with Schwarzenegger for years. Kennedy has said that she and the Republican governor agree on almost everything — she voted for all four of his initiatives on the Nov. 8 special election ballot, something even some stalwart Republicans didn't do. All of the measures were soundly defeated.

Thompson said Kennedy's appointment represents the governor's desire to take skilled people from both parties and it "reflects his magnetism, not the other way around."

She said: "This is the Schwarzenegger administration, and he is going to remain true to leading from the center and bringing people together."

Assemblyman Ray Haynes (R-Riverside) said Kennedy represents "the canary in the coal mine" — the last chance conservatives like himself are giving Schwarzenegger.

"I spent a lot of time trying to explain what the governor has

said and defended it. I gave him the benefit of the doubt and told people he was going to do the right thing," Haynes said. "I am not going to do that anymore."

Conservatives have specific complaints about Kennedy. For one, she was executive director of the Democratic Party in 1992 when an operative, Bob Mulholland, publicly accused Republican U.S. Senate candidate Bruce Herschensohn of visiting a Sunset Boulevard strip club. Herschensohn had been running as the traditional-values candidate.

Amid the controversy, Herschensohn lost the Senate race to Democrat Barbara Boxer, and the GOP was outraged at what it called a "smear campaign." Kennedy suspended Mulholland, but he soon returned to the party.

Costa Mesa attorney Michael Houston, a state Republican Party Central Committee member, said the anger at Kennedy's appointment "is not just from the activists. It's across the spectrum."

"The worry is that if a Democrat chief of staff has someone sitting on the Republican executive committee representing her, that could lead to a stealing or theft of strategy that could be detrimental to the Republican Party," Houston said.



Other Republicans said they might stop working for Schwarzenegger's campaign.

"By selecting somebody who has been such a warrior against the values our members have, those people will say, 'Forget it, I am never going down to the headquarters again.' The true believers will focus on county supervisors and school board races," said Michael Der Manouel, Jr., president of the Lincoln Club of Fresno County and a GOP activist.

Jon Fleischman, a Republican activist who operates a website for conservative commentary, [www.flashreport.org](http://www.flashreport.org), has fielded more than 1,000 e-mails and dozens of articles from outraged Republicans. He said he "has not seen this kind of strong reaction on an issue since I have been doing the report, and that is 2001."

"It used to be when Arnold would do stuff that would rankle conservatives, the county chairmen would say, 'I am having trouble with my people,' Fleischman said. "Now the county chairmen are calling up and saying, 'Your problem is not with the people, the problem is with me.' The people who are much more savvy politically have just had it."

*Staff writer Michael Der Manouel contributed to this report.*