

# California Dreamin' on the Eve of Termination

**BERKELEY, CALIFORNIA** – It became painfully clear to me, as I roamed around the San Francisco Bay area on the eve of Arnold Schwarzenegger's ascension to the governor's mansion, that the promise of California – the dream of a new sun-bathed life in ecotopia that lured generations to this Pacific Mecca – is dead. Utopia's gone awry with today's Golden State having succumbed to social Darwinism. California now brazenly sports obscene extremes of wealth and poverty.

The rich are getting richer and they're in your face everywhere you turn. The poor are both omnipresent and invisible, spending their lives commuting across county lines in search of menial work and affordable homes. And the middle class, like the dreamers and artists that once shaped California's image as the promised land, are disappearing, either succumbing to the tortures of poverty or fleeing California's 70-hour workweeks and multi-thousand dollar rents. California is now pocked with Lexus clogged streets and sidewalks packed with wagon trains of shopping carts – the mobile homes for the state's ever-expanding homeless set.

Today's wealthy Californians are afraid of the monster of a society created by their lust for ever larger homes and cars, and their disdain for taxes. They are now imprisoned and entombed in secure, alarmed houses and gated communities, segregated from the people who cook their food and clean their pools. Their boundless lawns cover the desert, watered by the very blood of the earth, as lakes and rivers are sucked dry across the west. Ever-expanding ribbons of asphalt wrap this surreal environment tighter and tighter as more and more Californians spend ever-increasing portions of their lives sitting in traffic

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going nowhere, their cars looking more and more like coffins with each passing day. In this society, both detached from and afraid of reality, Arnold Schwarzenegger offers hope.

Media-drenched America is losing its grip on reality. Information is giving way to infotainment. TV gossip tabloids and propaganda are both replacing news programming. And Americans are spending more and more time sequestered in their viewing pens, immersing themselves in a virtual world instead of the real one.

Hence, it really shouldn't shock anyone that Californians were ready to dump their real life boring Al Gorish governor in favor of the Terminator. I mean, let's be real here. We've all seen the movies. The guy can work around the clock without sleep. He's literally bulletproof. He saved humanity twice and has been to the future. Given these attributes, I'd vote for him too.

### **"Puke politics" and gag orders**

The real-life problem is that this is precisely how and why Californians voted. With the exception of a few 11th hour allegations about groping, there never was any discussion of who Arnold Schwarzenegger is and what he stands for. Nightly newscasts showed him belting out canned sound bite phrases like "puke politics" to cheering shopping mall crowds while struggling to avoid multi-syllable words.

For his part, Schwarzenegger, during his two month political career, successfully avoided addressing issues, instead invoking campy lines from his old action films. In essence, he ran not as citizen Schwarzenegger, a man with no managerial, diplomatic or economics background, but as the Terminator. He successfully managed to let his campaign play out, not in the presence of journalists who might ask tough political questions, but in the company of old entertainment industry friends such as Jay Leno, Oprah Winfrey, Howard Stern and Larry King.

This has been Schwarzenegger's operating protocol since the freakish Austrian bodybuilder was first crafted into a Hollywood star. Speaking to the San Jose Mercury News, the director of Schwarzenegger's first action film ("Hercules in New York"), Arthur Seidelman, explained how "Arnold's entire career has been manufactured," with the actor relying on public relations spinmeisters and a team of lawyers to maintain control of his public persona.

For the California recall election, team Schwarzenegger required campaign workers to sign a five page confidentiality agreement. The contract, in essence, identified Schwarzenegger as a brand, much like Nike, with a carefully crafted image and brand equity. It points out that Schwarzenegger "is a public figure and substantial effort and expense have been dedicated to limit the constant efforts of the press, other media and

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the public to learn of personal and business affairs." Campaign workers who grant interviews talking about the candidate turned governor-elect will, according to the contract, have to forfeit up to \$50,000 per transgression.

While such a contract may be acceptable for an actor protecting his privacy, it shouldn't be tolerated of a public official managing the world's sixth largest economy and America's most populous state. Putting a gubernatorial candidate off limits to the scrutiny of the press, impotent as it usually is, constitutes nothing less than a full frontal attack on democratic values. There will be no discussion of the issues – just the election.

### **"Fascism" and Enron right on target**

To Europeans, accustomed to a more lively political culture, the California recall raises the specter of fascism. As William Rees-Mogg of the London Times puts it, "Arnold Schwarzenegger is relying on the appeal of fascism, whether or not he is personally a fascist." Rees-Mogg explains, "He does not run on experience. He has been a politician for only eight weeks. He does not run on policy. He relies on catch phrases and on empty generalization. He does not debate the issues. He has taken part in only one debate.... His campaign exists outside rationality, in the world of celebrity and sensation. The politics of mass emotion are the politics of fascism."

For all intents and purposes, Schwarzenegger is a mystery candidate without anything resembling a platform. All we really know is that he promised to erase California's \$8 billion deficit while cutting \$4 billion worth of auto fees and preserving education funding, which makes up 40% of the state's budget. Beyond this fiscal wizardry, Schwarzenegger's plans as governor, assuming he has some, are a mystery. All we have to work on are little reported clues. We have no idea what his views are on mass transportation, but we know he owns six personal Hummers. We don't know his platform on retail sprawl, but we know Target stores is one of his major campaign sponsors.

What seems to be less of a mystery, is why some of the most powerful business players in the west wanted Gray Davis out of office and the Terminator installed in his place. According to BBC reporter Greg Palast, some of the major players behind what we now know as Enron's multi-billion dollar rip-off of California electric ratepayers, engineered the recall. It goes like this: The Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC), headed by an associate of former Enron CEO and Bush buddy Ken Lay, proposed that the energy companies who ripped of California rate payers by engineering a fake energy crisis, pay back those ratepayers to the tune of two cents per dollar stolen. In order for this settlement to fly, however, the governor of California must sign off on it. But the Davis administration offered no deal. Instead, Lieutenant Governor Cruz Bustamante pushed

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forth with a \$9 billion lawsuit against the same energy companies.

Here's where Palast's reporting comes into play. He cites 34 pages of internal Enron memos uncovered by the Los Angeles based Foundation for Taxpayer and Consumer Rights. These memos, according to Palast, show that one month after Bustamante filed his suit, Enron players held an emergency meeting, cooking up a scheme to kill the \$9 billion suit by recalling the governor and replacing him with one who would sign the FERC's sweetheart deal, thus negating Bustamante's lawsuit. The ensuing recall cost California's taxpayers \$66 million and cost Gray Davis his job.

Sinister as this plan seems, it only worked because in the end, Gray Davis did in fact fail as a governor. During his tenure in office, he abandoned the progressive Democratic base that initially elected him, instead opting to tout the corporate-friendly line of the Democratic Leadership Committee. When he imposed 30-40% fee increases at California's public colleges and universities, his constituency rebelled. In the end, it was union members, students and the poor, formerly Davis' core constituency, who voted to recall the governor who let them down. It was the politics of concession that caused Davis' base to abandon him as Californians voted to damn both the governor and themselves. And finally, it was the media, who put Schwarzenegger's face everywhere while never asking him a difficult question, that sealed the state's fate.

With Schwarzenegger not yet in office, Californians are already talking about another gubernatorial recall. As they would say in what now passes for political discourse in California, judgment day is coming. Hasta la Vista baby. ●