Gubernatorial Goldrush

Why the Terminator is no Gipper.

By Jonathan Rowe

Next to being sued by Bill O'Reilly, one of the best things that could happen to the author of a political biography is for the story to play out again just as the book is going on sale. That's what happened to Lou Cannon regarding this new biography of a Hollywood actor who becomes Republican governor of California.

Cannon's good fortune is ours as well. Without the Davis recall, Governor Reagan would have been mainly of historical interest. Now, considering that Schwarzenegger has named Reagan as his model, it becomes a divining rod for what lies ahead.

The book also is a pleasure. Cannon has covered Reagan since his first campaign for governor in 1966, and the result is biography that often approaches memoir. Cannon is present but not intrusive, a trickier task than one might think (vide Edmund Morris's Dutch). He clearly likes Reagan; and it speaks to Cannon's fairness of mind that, seeing through his eyes, we come to like Reagan, too.

Yet Cannon is clear-eyed on Reagan's failings—his disengagement both mental and emotional, for example, and his tendency to be led by staff. Cannon does not hide his differences on policy either. These observations cut deep because he does not make them with relish—a lesson the writers of CBS' aborted and (according to reports) sophomoric biopic of Reagan apparently never learned. But probably the most interesting thing about Governor Reagan at this moment is the light it sheds on the character who looms offstage—Arnold Schwarzenegger.

The symmetry is indeed uncanny. Republican actor issues forth from the moneyped precincts of Southern California, promising to unshackle enterprise from the stifling grip of government, and sporting a perennial tan. Candidate is dismissed as a mere (and mediocre) actor who lacks experience for the job, yet defeats an unpopular Democrat beset by fiscal woes. Nationally, Democrats pick up vague seismic forebodings which they hope will go away.

But does Arnold's election really continue the nation's move to the right that Reagan helped to start? Not likely. Reagan concealed the Republican Party's rightward flank at a time when its Washington establishment tended toward the center. Now Schwarzenegger could do the opposite, and provide a counterweight to the party's new hard-right tilt.

The strange part is, he could do this even as he follows the example of Governor Reagan that Lou Cannon has portrayed.

For all the similarities of story line, Ronald Reagan and Arnold Schwarzenegger are very different. When Reagan was first elected, someone asked him how he would govern. "I don't know," Reagan replied, "I've never played a governor before." He was joking but also not joking, Cannon observes. Reagan was a true actor who found himself emotionally in the roles he inhabited. Offstage he was a kind man who tended to be inattentive to what was going on around him.

"When advisor Martin Anderson, exited from Reagan's entourage because of a staff purge that the candidate ignored, rejoined the Presidential campaign after a long absence," Cannon writes, "he sensed that Reagan was happy to have him back without quite knowing he had been away."

Cannon's Reagan was entirely capable of tuning out an Iran-Contra scandal. His son Michael said that he often was "completely oblivious" to others. Reagan's guardedness in life probably was connected to his extraordinary ability to nestle into the public mind—to be to people in general what he could not be to people in particular.

But Reagan was not the dummy that his critics assume. He was a
shrewd politician with a strong internal compass and a fine ear for audience. Governor Reagan suggests that state government brought out the best in him, since it made him grapple with the concrete in a way that Washington did not. The results could be surprising. Early in his first term, for example, Reagan signed the largest tax increase in California history. The corporate tax rate doubled, and the top individual rate went from 7 to 11 percent, making it possible to balance the budget without cutting funds for schools. It also got rid of the unpleasantness three years before the next election.

Reagan also signed what was then the most liberal abortion bill in the country. (Nancy Reagan's father, a retired surgeon, favored such a loosening.) Determined to show he could govern, Reagan compromised with California's Democratic legislature, and got as good as he gave. That's part of Schwarzenegger's model.

So, too, is an environmental record that in retrospect is amaz-}

ing. It was Ronald Reagan—yes, Ronald Reagan—who stopped a big highway project in the Sierras that would have cut the John Muir Trail in half. It was Ronald Reagan who stopped a major dam on the Eel River that would have wiped out a beautiful valley and an Indian settlement. "We've broken too many damn treaties," he said.

Reagan helped create the Redwood National Forest and added 145,000 acres to the state park system, along with two ocean preserves. How could this be the same politician a decade later would sic James Watt on the nation's wilderness and prairies?

The answer says much about Reagan and how he governed. Reagan had an affinity for the out of doors since his boyhood in Dixon, Ill. He loved riding horseback on his California ranch. But these emotions were latent, like those he brought to his movie parts. They required a director, and in Sacramento that was Ike Livermore, Reagan's secretary of resources.

Reagan didn't actually choose Livermore. Tom Reed, Reagan's appointments secretary, did. Livermore worked for a timber company, but he also was an ardent outdoorsman and a friend of David Brower, an environmental icon. Reagan liked Livermore because he came from business and rode horseback. Livermore understood Reagan and how to appeal to his conservationist instincts.

To engage Reagan in the fight against the Sierra highway, for example, Livermore arranged a backpack trip on horseback to see the affected area. It didn't hurt that such projects were darlings of Reagan's predecessor, Edmund "Pat" Brown, a New Deal Democrat for whom progress was practically synonymous with concrete. Protecting nature became a happy offshoot of stopping Big Government.

So what about James Watt, Reagan's first interior secretary who never saw a prairie he didn't want to pave? Reagan didn't really choose Watt either; he came by way of Sen. Paul Laxalt of Nevada, a close advisor. Reagan did not set out to be a bulldozer man. He simply didn't pay a lot of attention, since he was more concerned with taxes and the Soviet Union, which fit directly into the larger ideological drama in which he saw himself cast.

Exercising power

At the personal level, Arnold Schwarzenegger is cut from different cloth. There is a hard, industrial quality to his ambition; he pumped his way to celebrity with chemicals and iron. Where Reagan came to Hollywood to be a star, with Schwarzenegger, power and money seem a larger part of the equation. He has a good business mind and does not hesitate to throw his weight around. His acting roles have been celebrity vehicles. Where Reagan found himself in parts, Schwarzenegger's parts find themselves in him.

Whatever else this means, I suspect that Schwarzenegger will be

Future Golden State governors: Ronald Reagan (left), a former Lowell Park lifeguard; Arnold Schwarzenegger, formerly in the role of "Conan the Barbarian."
on top of things in a way that Reagan generally was not. Reagan wanted to pre- side; Schwarzenegger, I think, will enjoy the exercise of power. Less emotionally guarded with individuals, he has less of Reagan's ability to project himself emotionally into the popular psyche. More engaged in the day-to-day, he will have less ability to deflect criticism, though celebrity has Teflon of its own. And Arnold, for all his corporate boosting, just might be a little less gauzy-eyed about the market in the abstract. People who actually engage in business tend to be less romantic about it than are ideologues for whom it is a personal psychodrama.

The Great Inoculator

Cannon's Reagan was not a man to inflict pain or harm. It is impossible to imagine him making piggish advances towards women—or anyone else—as Arnold has done. Arnold is known in the movie business as someone who is charming to peers, but not always to folks who work “below the line.” The Hitler talk in the campaign was desperate and silly. But since his days as a body-builder Arnold has shown a tendency to dominate and inflict humiliation that suggests a shadow region in his psyche that Reagan simply did not have.

My guess is that Arnold will keep that side under tight control and perhaps even bend the other way to compensate. Like Reagan, he'll have his Hollywood experience in projecting visual images of compassion and command. His policies seem quite close to those of Governor Reagan. Most likely, he will make a deal with the legislative Democrats on taxes, as Reagan did, and then blame it on the wasteful Dems. The public will forgive. He has little interest in the right-wing moral agenda, just as Reagan did not.

On the environment, Arnold seems quite strong. His platform calls for half of new homes in California to be solar by 2005, and a 50-percent cut in air pollution by an unspecified date. He wants “hydrogen highways” throughout the state to hasten a transition to non-polluting cars. He has appointed a bona fide environmentalist to his top environment job—and unlike Reagan, he knows what he is getting.

What's different is cultural. Reagan emerged politically as a reaction to the '60s. His first political role was that of a stern father figure who put his foot down over the excesses at Berkeley. This was a defining drama for the right-wing psyche, much the way resistance to porcine Southern sheriffs became a fixture in the psyche of the left. It provided a bridge between the corporate free-marketers and the moral authoritarians who define the poles of the Republican Party. Reagan himself was, in Hendrick Hertzberg’s apt phrase, a “closet tolerant.” But his stern father role offered a kind of Rorschach onto which the moralist right could project its views without Reagan actually holding them.

Schwarzenegger provides no such bridge. As The Economist has pointed out, Arnold was a part of the '60s that Reagan defined himself against. His was the lifestyle '60s as opposed to the political '60s, but the '60s still. He ingested many chemicals and slept in many beds. One reason the eleventh-hour dropping charges didn't stick was that Arnold never has pretended to be a paragon, or pointed the finger at anyone else. Henceforth, it will be harder for Republicans to bed- or drug-bait Democrats. The Terminator might indeed become the Inoculator; which is one reason the Republican right in California hasn't embraced him.

Reagan spoke to the parents of the Baby Boomers, Arnold to Boomers themselves. In California, this is not the worst place for a Republican to be: pro-business and anti-tax, but laissez-faire on gender and lifestyle as well, and strong on the environment. For Democrats, it is not good news. It means potential loss of two of their strongest trump cards. Of course, Arnold has to show that he can stand his ground on the environment despite his corporate boosterism, which is no easy task. He also has to find a way to court the social conservatives in his own party who voted against him in the recall. That won't be easy either.

There's no question that a Republican governor in California softens up the state for Bush. But for the president, Schwarzenegger is a
mixed blessing. His bright new Republican star is climbing at the very moment that Bush's is losing luster. Yes, Schwarzenegger needs federal help with his state's gaping budget deficit. But politically, Bush needs him more than he needs the president—not a comfortable place for Bush to be.

Most importantly, Schwarzenegger's politics could serve as a foil to Bush's—from the Republican side. His live-and-let-live social views show Bush's Southern strategy for what it is, while his strong social views for the environment—on paper at least—highlight the toadying of Bush and Cheney to their friends in the oil industry et al.

With their new action hero supporting gay rights and choice, it becomes harder for Republicans to savage Democrats who hold those views. And his promotion of solar homes and green buildings makes it harder for Republicans to cast such things as threats to jobs and growth. Nationally, as in California, a lot of Americans agree with him. But for the ruling clique in Washington that claims the mantle of Ronald Reagan, it is not the Gipper II they probably had in mind.

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