

Five Faces of Jerry Brown

Which incarnation is eyeing California's top job (again)?

By Jesse Walker

OFFICIALLY, Jerry Brown isn't a candidate in California's budding gubernatorial campaign. Unofficially, he's widely expected to take the Democratic nomination and has a good shot at prevailing in the general election. If he wins, he'll be reclaiming a job he left 28 years before, embarking on yet another chapter in a life that has changed direction more times than a Sarah Palin sentence.

By turns eccentric and ambitious, spacey and shrewd, Brown has shown more faces in the last four decades than any ordinary statesman: a conventional heir to a political dynasty, a hippie-monkish governor with a taste for visionary ideas, a populist insurgent and talk-show host who rubbed shoulders with the radical Left, a nuts-and-bolts mayor of a corroded California city. Whatever his next incarnation might be, it will be rooted somehow in all the other versions that came before it.

The First Face of Jerry Brown

When Jerry Brown entered politics, he wasn't called Jerry Brown. He was Edmund G. Brown Jr., son of a former governor and, as far as the average voter could tell, not so different from dad. At this point, the younger Brown had been through several lives already: a seminary student who stopped short of becoming a priest, a globetrotting seeker who studied abroad, a lawyer who needed two tries to pass the California Bar. But his public life began as Pat Brown's kid, getting elected to the Los Angeles Community College Board of Trustees in 1969 because he shared

his father's name and then becoming California's secretary of state more or less the same way.

The senior Brown was associated with popular programs ranging from the Interstate to the state university system, and he was skilled at working both sides of the aisle. He had made his share of political missteps—Ronald Reagan's right-wing rebellion had blindsided him in 1966—but now he was a revered elder statesman. Voters remembered him fondly enough to cast their ballots for an almost identical name.

In 1974, at age 36, Jerry Brown won the race to replace the retiring Reagan as governor, defeating the Republican nominee Houston Flournoy with a vague campaign that didn't reveal much about Brown's views. In an entertaining tell-all, *Jerry Brown: The Man on the White Horse*, J.D. Lorenz, a fired Brown aide, quoted his boss bragging about a TV ad on crime: "I sound tougher than Flournoy, and I haven't proposed anything the liberals can criticize me for. In fact, I haven't committed myself to do anything at all." In *Mother Jones*, Paul Jacobs reported watching the future governor work some potential voters. The candidate didn't invoke space exploration or Buddhist economics. He said, "Hello, I'm Jerry Brown. I'm Pat Brown's son, and I'm running for governor. I hope you'll vote for me."

His unorthodox side was almost completely concealed. In that first gubernatorial campaign, a minor candidate—Elizabeth Keathley of the radical Peace and Freedom Party—promised that if

elected, she'd adopt Brown and give him his old room in the governor's mansion back. No one suspected that once in office, Brown would decide to do without a mansion altogether.

The Second Face of Jerry Brown

Brown served two four-year terms as California's governor, and during that time he ran twice for the presidency. As his fame grew, he developed a bizarre public reputation in much of the country, but in his home state at least he was a successful politician. Widely remembered as a flamboyant liberal, he in fact mixed ideas from Left and Right, attracting support from Californians who ordinarily despised Democrats. When he ran for re-election in 1978, he managed to carry even the famously Republican Orange County.

In office, the younger Brown was anything but a clone of his father. Pat Brown had been an establishment Democrat of the mid-20th century, liberal but not radical, with both feet planted in the Roosevelt coalition. Jerry was an unconventional governor with a fondness for unconventional ideas; his style owed more to TV than to traditional machine politics. If Ronald Reagan was a product of pop culture who remade himself as a politician, Jerry Brown was a politician who made himself a part of pop culture.

Like Reagan, Brown had a gift for media-savvy symbolism. "If a picture was worth a thousand words," Lorenz wrote, "then, in Jerry's view, the right symbol was worth a thousand pictures."



Brown avoided the expensive new governor's mansion and rented a \$275 apartment instead; he drove a Plymouth rather than being chauffeured in a limo; he took a salary cut; he slept on a futon; he dated Linda Ronstadt; he described his job as "a pain in the ass" and told reporters he liked to govern through "creative inaction"; he put the Beat poet Gary Snyder on the California Arts Council. If those impulses weren't entirely consistent, that only enhanced the symbolic effect. Brown didn't represent a coherent ideology so much as an inchoate *gestalt*. In the New Age California of the '70s, that seemed appropriate.

Even Brown's critics sometimes cited the symbols that had gotten attached to the man more often than his actual policies. For decades, the phrase most closely associated with Brown has been "Governor Moonbeam," a jibe from the Chicago columnist Mike Royko, though hardly anyone remembers the proposal that prompted the label. (Brown had suggested the state launch its own communications satellite. The idea doesn't sound so flaky today.) Royko himself disavowed the nickname after the governor gave a speech that impressed him at the 1980 Democratic Convention. But Brown still had trouble shaking the image.

Royko wasn't the only wit who found it hard to call back his Brown-bashing jokes. Consider the Dead Kennedys, the San Francisco punk band behind the most savagely funny pop-culture assault on the governor, the 1979 single "California Über Alles." Many people saw something authoritarian

lurking behind Brown's easygoing rhetoric: he told the *New York Times* that he offered "leadership," not "programs," and after his 1980 presidential campaign sputtered to a close, one of his staffers told *Time* that Brown "began to believe he was the founder of a new movement, a messiah of sorts." Impressions like that prompted the band to record lyrics like these:

*I am Governor Jerry Brown
My aura smiles and never frowns
Soon I will be president...*

*Zen fascists will control you
100 percent natural
You will jog for the master race
And always wear the happy face*

By the end of the song, the "suede denim secret police" have led an "uncool" girl to a concentration camp, where she's executed with "organic poison gas." The author of those lyrics, Jello Biafra, would speak favorably of Brown's third presidential campaign in 1992. But like Royko, he couldn't stop a thought he'd already released into the world.

Brown's actual policies were just as mixed as his symbols. He was by no means unfriendly to the Left. In his first

presidential campaign, in 1976, he picked Black Panther chief Elaine Brown as one of his convention delegates. But Governor Brown was much more of a fiscal conservative than Governor Reagan, even if he made arguments for austerity that the Republican would never use. (At one point, to get across the idea that a lean organization could outperform a bloated bureaucracy, he offered the example of the Viet Cong.) Reagan had raised taxes several times and boosted spending by an average of 12.2 percent a year. In his first year as governor, by contrast, Brown increased spending by just 4.6 percent, less than the rate of inflation. He wasn't always so restrained in the rest of his reign, but he was thriftier than his predecessor, accumulating one of the biggest budget surpluses in California history. In Brown's first gubernatorial campaign, he had denounced "recycled Reaganism." In Brown's first year in office, Reagan's director of programs and policies joked that his old boss "thinks Jerry Brown has gone too far to the right."

Brown also favored a balanced budget amendment and, though he opposed the tax-cutting Proposition 13 while it was on the ballot, he slashed spending merrily to meet its requirements once the initiative became law. Sometimes his rhetoric seemed to question the very premises of the welfare state. "The income supplement is never going to be enough if people are estranged from society," he told *Time* in 1975. "But if you have children to take care of you, friends, a nice community, it's a winner."

At the same time, he liberalized the state's marijuana law, decriminalized homosexuality, and strongly opposed the death penalty. This combination of fiscal austerity and social tolerance might seem libertarian. Indeed, Eric Garris wrote a generally favorable piece about Brown for *Reason* in 1975, and

Murray Rothbard praised him that same year in *The Libertarian Forum*, though his later remarks about the governor were more caustic. Brown even hired the old left-libertarian firebrand Wilson Clark as his energy adviser. But Brown also called for mandatory national service, endorsed the Humphrey-Hawkins full-employment bill, and deployed a series of subsidies and regulations to enact his environmental agenda. In that same *Time* interview, he turned from denouncing government planning to declaring that public intervention would be necessary to reach full employment.

Many New Agers straddled the boundaries between Left and Right and between libertarianism and statism. But Brown drew on opposite wings of the New Age as well. During the 1980 presidential campaign, Brown hailed two intellectual inspirations: the small-is-beautiful economist E.F. Schumacher and the inventor/futurist Buckminster Fuller. It's difficult to imagine two more different thinkers. Schumacher was the guru of accepting our limits, Fuller the prophet of limitless possibility. But if you wanted to sum up the cocktail that was the crunchy California counterculture of the '70s, it would be hard to find a better pair to invoke. The number of consistent Fullerites or Schumacherians in the world was dwarfed by the number of people who were open-minded enough to read both. Fuller and Schumacher were both staples of the *Whole Earth Catalog*, a publication whose sensibility Brown brought to the governorship. (Indeed, *Whole Earth* regular J. Baldwin joined the state Office of Appropriate Technology, a Brown invention, and *Whole Earth* founder Stewart Brand was named a special adviser to the governor. Brown even contributed to the *Whole Earth* spin-off *CoEvolution Quarterly*, sitting in on interviews with libertarian psychiatrist Thomas Szasz and neoconservative futurist Herman Kahn.)

Perhaps this was just a more intense variety of politics as usual. Nearly every politician dreams of being all things to all people; Brown had found a way to treat that inconstancy as an Aquarian virtue. ("Doonesbury" depicted the governor's supporters chanting, "Hey, ho! Go with the flow!") Yet there was something more here, something that spoke to why Brown was a man of pop culture as well as politics. For many Americans he had come to embody postwar California, a Democratic yin to Reagan's Republican yang.

And something else was at work. With Watergate and the aftereffects of the '60s, mainstream American liberalism moved simultaneously to the left and the right; for the first time in decades, there was a quasi-libertarian current in the Democratic Party. The new liberals were more skeptical of the national-security state, more supportive of civil liberties, and more critical of corporate power. Their skepticism toward centralized authority led them to use the phrase "big government" disparagingly, just like the Reaganites, and to push through more economic deregulation than President Reagan ever would. One effect of freeing the airline and trucking industries, after all, was to bust up some long-lived corporate cartels.

Obviously this wasn't the dominant faction of the party, but it wasn't limited to Brown either. It flared when Eugene McCarthy attacked the Internal Revenue Service, when Fred Harris called for abolishing the Interstate Commerce Commission, when George McGovern—George McGovern!—declared, "Government has become so vast and impersonal that its interests diverge more and more from the interests of ordinary citizens." It had a foothold in the Carter administration, which flirted with legalizing marijuana and embraced bills that deregulated planes, trains, and trucks. Even the

thoroughly technocratic Michael Dukakis paid lip service to such ideas during his first term as governor of Massachusetts.

If the current had a standard-bearer, it was Brown, with his mix of populist bravado, social tolerance, and fiscal restraint. But when Brown challenged Carter for the presidency in 1980, he failed. Being a pop figure, he managed even to flop in a pop-saturated way. The governor brought in Francis Ford Coppola to produce a live half-hour TV special in Madison, Wisconsin, shortly before the state's primary. The results might be the biggest blot on Coppola's filmography: Brown's microphone died, the program opened with a pair of typos ("Live from Madisno, Wisoc"), and images that were supposed to appear behind Brown instead materialized on the candidate's face. Coppola later said the show "looked as if it were a transmission from some clandestine place on Mars."

Brown returned to Sacramento, ran unsuccessfully for the Senate, and left office in 1983. Then he dropped out of politics and traveled the world. At one point he turned up in Japan, studying Zen.

The Third Face of Jerry Brown

In 1989, Brown became the chairman of the California Democratic Party. He threw himself into the business of raising money and getting out the vote. After two years, he quit. Denouncing the "confederacy of corruption, careerism, and campaign consulting in Washington," he entered the 1992 race for the Democratic presidential nomination.

He seemed to be the most left-wing and right-wing man in the field. In an early debate, when moderator Cokie Roberts asked the candidates if they would have paroled an ex-con who had recently raped a child, Brown declared the query manipulative and delivered

an extemporaneous speech about the ways fear of crime feeds a loss of civil liberties. The same candidate called for term limits, a flat tax, and the abolition of the Department of Education. His willingness to break with liberal orthodoxy on taxes led to denunciations from the party regulars, but by the end of the race he had been embraced by much of the Left.

That was partly because he was the only candidate remaining besides Bill Clinton, the establishment's man; partly because he enjoyed the early support of heterodox leftists such as novelist Gore Vidal and columnist Alexander Cockburn; and partly because he moved leftward on one major issue, denouncing NAFTA as the campaign entered the Rust Belt. It was also because Brown had made himself a symbol again. His campaign embraced the emerging alternative media of talk radio and cable TV, and it financed itself with a 1-800 number. (At the first Democratic debate, Brown aggravated the moderator by holding up a sign with his phone number on it every time he answered a question.) It was a grassroots campaign driven by small donations—no contributions greater than \$100 were accepted—and it was more successful than any mainstream analyst expected, drawing in around 120,000 donors and carrying three states. In a year when Pat Buchanan was leading one populist charge on the Right and Ross Perot was leading another in the radical center, Brown emerged as their equivalent on the Left. The fact that the trio more or less agreed on several central issues—trade deals, military intervention, the power of the American establishment—made their triple blitz all the more intriguing.

In the wake of the campaign, Brown seemed to grow even more radical. He got his own talk show on Pacifica, the

long-lived leftist radio network. He interviewed Noam Chomsky for *Spin*. He declared himself a “recovering politician” and resigned from the Democratic Party. He even moved into a commune. When he finally re-entered politics, his ambitions were local: the man who once had governed the nation's most populous state, and had aspired to be president of the entire country, now wanted to tend his own garden as mayor of Oakland, a mid-sized city and one of the most left-wing municipalities in the United States.

During the race, Brown veered away from the visionary talk toward such elemental issues as development and crime. But even his law-and-order plans had a radical scent. Brown called for establishing 57 neighborhood crime-prevention councils, not just to contain misbehavior but to establish “a form of democratic power—the power from below.” The man somehow managed to sound like an anarchist even when he was mulling ways to crack down on law-breakers.

He was easily elected. And then he changed again.

The Fourth Face of Jerry Brown

As mayor, Brown allied himself with cops and developers. He shooed away citizens who fretted that a new condo would disturb some ducks, aggravated labor activists by courting investment from The Gap, allowed the Marines to conduct urban-warfare training maneuvers in the city, and pushed through public funding for the Oakland Military Institute, a prep school for members of the California Cadet Corps. Now he was being denounced by his former allies on the Left and praised in places like the neoconservative *City Journal*. During the California recall election of 2003, he became a regular on right-wing radio stations, bashing Democratic Gov. Gray Davis with glee.

Some of this shift wasn't as severe as it seemed. The military school was a charter school, and the charter-school movement was an easy fit with Brown's old decentralist rhetoric. (Brown told *City Journal* that he would also love to see a charter academy inspired by the legendary free school Summerhill.) And there were plenty of people on the Left who loathed Davis and supported his recall. But Brown governed as a pragmatic centrist, not a New Age guru or a populist radical. In 2000, he rejoined the Democratic Party and endorsed Al Gore in the primaries—the better to maintain federal funding for his city, he said. (The old Brown wasn't entirely dead, though. In the general election he voted for Ralph Nader.)

The strongest sign that Brown had changed his stripes yet again didn't involve a shift from the Left to the Right. It was a shift from the local to the large. After eight years atop Oakland, Brown the relapsed politician ran to be the state attorney general. He took office in January 2007, setting the stage for the latest phase of his career.

The Fifth Face of Jerry Brown

Three and a half decades ago, Jerry Brown replaced a retired movie star as the chief executive of California. Now he's interested in doing the same thing again. A lot can change in the next year, but at the moment he's generally favored to win the Democratic nomination: halfway through 2009, Brown's campaign war chest already held \$7.3 million—and he isn't even a declared candidate yet.

Many of Brown's earlier enthusiasts have given up on him. Cockburn recently upbraided the likely candidate for the “cynicism” of “a platform that denounces medical care for prisoners as a frivolous expense.” Still, Brown's earlier personae aren't absent from his budding campaign. The young governor who told *Time* it

President Obama has declared that the objective of fighting in Af-Pak is to prevent al-Qaeda from using it as a safe haven from which to stage an attack on the United States. Many doubt that al-Qaeda has the resources to take the

offensive while others question whether terrorists even require a geographical base to plan an operation. Three American professors are now questioning whether Osama bin Laden is even alive. Angelo Codevilla, Bruce Lawrence, and David Ray Griffin claim that the al-Qaeda leader was most likely killed in December 2001, citing the lack of any independently verifiable sightings of him since that time. Codevilla believes that it is more likely that Elvis still lives. American intelligence has verified a number of audio-tapes of bin Laden, but experts in voice identification admit that the tapes are of poor quality, perhaps deliberately so. It is possible to edit a tape using existing recordings and to keep retaping it until the quality is so low that the editing cannot be detected. The recordings contain bin Laden's actual voice, but there is no way to tell when they were made, even though they refer to current issues, because they might be cleverly produced composites derived from presumably thousands of hours of recordings made by the al-Qaeda leader when he was alive. Griffin believes that U.S. intelligence knows the truth but is engaging in a massive cover-up because many in the government want the inflated budgets that come from a war against terrorists that goes on forever.



President Obama recognized that America's image in the world was, to say the least, tarnished and made it a principal point of his campaign to insist that he would be able to improve our reputation. He might have started by rooting

out all of the neocons who had taken over government-supported broadcasting to overseas audiences, but instead he has opted to maintain the status quo, as with his policies in Iraq and Afghanistan. Not a single top official at the Voice of America or Radio Free Europe has been replaced. In fact, recent developments suggest that the neocons not only remain, but are pursuing their usual vendettas. They recently got rid of their nemesis at the Voice of America Persian Service, Sheila Gandji, who defied them by not promoting war with Iran and refusing to hire their protégé Amir Abbas Fakhraei, a self-promoting Iranian student resistance "hero" who has what might be described as a questionable biography. Head of the Board of Governors James Glassman, an American Enterprise Institute alumnus and Bush administration holdover as State's undersecretary for public diplomacy, promised Republicans during his Senate confirmation hearings in 2008 that he would get rid of Gandji. Glassman will soon be moving on to become executive director of the "action-oriented think tank" at the Bush Library at Southern Methodist University. The George W. Bush Institute will promote the "ideas" that came out of the Bush White House.

Philip Giraldi, a former CIA Officer, is a fellow with the American Conservative Defense Alliance.

was "a very salutary exercise to learn to live with" the "limit to the good things we have in this country" is now telling the same magazine that we're in, yes, "an era of limits." At a time when Washington Democrats think the way out of the recession is to encourage unsustainable consumer spending, Brown is denouncing the dangers of debt. "We're borrowing what we don't have to buy things we don't need," he said earlier this year, in a remark aimed not just at ordinary citizens but at the government itself. Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, like Governor Reagan before him, has spent heavily after being elected on a platform of fiscal restraint. The young Jerry Brown brought some discipline to the state's books. Perhaps the septuagenarian Brown can do the same.

Or perhaps he'll just pander. The man has reversed course so many times before that there's no reason to assume he'll stand by anything he says. When Jerry Brown wants power, he has a good sense of what he has to do to win and maintain it.

The fifth face of Jerry Brown might bear a family resemblance to the first face of Jerry Brown. The attorney general of the state of California isn't an inexperienced kid running on his father's name, but he looks more than a little like his father, a long-lived statesman who had his share of principles but tried not to let them get in the way of political survival. Jerry Brown is an intelligent man with a genuine love of ideas and an intuitive grasp of left-coast culture. If he's more likely than most politicians to say something deeply silly, he's also more likely to say something deeply right. But at his core, he's Edmund G. Brown. ■

Jesse Walker is managing editor of Reason and author of Rebels on the Air: An Alternative History of Radio in America.