

Ron Unz is hardly, as *The New Republic* suggests, the man who “controls California,” but few in the state have had more influence over the state’s public agenda in recent years. Is Unz the next Howard Jarvis, or just a rich geek in search of an ego rush?

California’s political pundit corps gathered at the University of California, Berkeley, this past winter for what has become a quadrennial ritual — the Institute of Governmental Studies’ post-mortem on the governor’s race. Over the course of two days, panel discussions dissected the primary and general election gubernatorial contests as well as ancillary topics such as media coverage, television commercials and such. Circulating among the scribes, eggheads, stu-

dict boundaries. The shotgun wedding ultimately never happened (see sidebar, page 20), but the fact that a number of prominent state and national Republicans gave serious thought to the idea is a measure of how far Unz has come in his comparatively short political life.

Since bursting on the state’s political scene with a quixotic but attention-grabbing 1994 primary challenge to incumbent Republican Governor Pete Wilson, Unz has become perhaps

Gadfly Extraordinaire

dents and politicians at this year’s conference was a familiar, smallish, black-haired figure whose very presence puzzled some of the attendees.

“What is *he* doing here?” whispered one participant to another as they watched the slim-necked man with the slightly rumpled clothing query a journalist about, of all things, campaign finance laws.

What had brought Ron K. Unz to Berkeley that January weekend was reconnaissance for his next “great crusade.” The 37-year-old physicist-turned-software-maker-turned-maverick activist had decided he was going to build the perfect campaign reform initiative. Not only was he going to get campaign finance reform approved, but he was going to entice the entire Republican Party along for the ride by hitching his proposal to one changing the system for redrawing political dis-

the most visible initiative superstar since the late Howard Jarvis of Proposition 13 fame. His successful effort to undo the state’s bilingual education system with 1998’s Proposition 227 has made him the darling of the national conservative media, championed by the editorial pages of the *Wall Street Journal* and, most recently, the subject of a 5,000-word cover profile in *The New Republic*. His willingness to self-finance his efforts has caused Unz’s critics, who span the political spectrum, to brand him as just another millionaire dilettante using the initiative process as a means to feed his ego. But his admirers, who also span the political spectrum, contend Unz’s activism is what the initiative process is all about — a committed individual with a populist message maneuvering around entrenched interests by taking his case directly to the voters.

By Steve Scott



"He's very compelling," said Tony Miller, the Democratic former acting secretary of state who is Unz's partner in the campaign reform effort. "He is a man that puts his money where his vision is."

It's hard to imagine a less obvious candidate for the role of maverick political force. Born and raised out of wedlock in the San Fernando Valley, Unz lived modestly as a child, set apart largely by his I.Q., which was tested at 214. Attending Harvard on a scholarship, Unz displayed the same restless mind that characterizes his present-

day efforts, double-majoring in theoretical physics and ancient history, while setting up his own foreign affairs speaker's club on the side. But a fellowship at Cambridge, which included study under famed physicist Stephen Hawking, and subsequent enrollment as a Ph.D. candidate at Stanford seemed to line him up for a career in research and teaching.

Working at a summer job for a New York securities firm in 1987, Unz used his self-taught skills as a computer programmer to develop financial software for the company. Aban-

doning research, he formed his own firm, Wall Street Analytics, to perfect and market the software, eventually becoming successful enough to move the firm to Silicon Valley,

Simultaneous with his business success, Unz's intellectual appetite also found meat in public policy discourse, especially surrounding the issue of immigration. He began contributing to conservative think-tanks such as the Manhattan Institute and, with characteristic compulsiveness, ordered up 15 years of back issues of the conservative publication *Commentary*.

Unz's personal interest in immigration — motivated, he says, by a family background that included immigrant grandparents and a mother whose first language was Yiddish — was intense enough for him to take note in the summer of 1993 when Pete Wilson, languishing in the high teens in public approval, began testing out his anti-immigrant themes in preparation for his re-election campaign. With the relatively good showing of

millionaire independent Ross Perot in the 1992 presidential campaign still fresh in his memory, Unz jumped into the June 1994 primary against Wilson, challenging the GOP's anti-immigration orthodoxy.

"I came out against Proposition 187 [the Wilson-backed anti-immigration initiative] in the primary," said Unz. "Wilson actually began running his 187 commercials in the primary, against me."

Change in strategy

The roughly one-third of the primary vote Unz received against Wilson whetted his appetite for more involvement, but the \$2 million he'd spent on the campaign drained his bank account. Unz more or less took 1996 off, but in the fall of that year, he took note of the boycott undertaken by a group of Latino parents at the Seventh Street Elementary School in downtown Los Angeles. The parents

Remap Flap

Ron Unz wheedled his way into a high-stakes GOP turf war over redistricting. While he suffered a rare setback, some Republicans believe Unz may yet have the last laugh.

By Steve Scott

The day after the 1998 elections, Republican anti-government activist Ted Costa sat down and began drafting an initiative designed to change the way legislative and congressional district lines are drawn. Like most other Republicans, Costa was worried that a united Democratic government in a redistricting year would mean a decade in the political wilderness. Seven months later, Costa began circulating a redistricting initiative, but by then he wasn't alone.

Ron Unz had entered the fray.

Saying he began mulling the idea as early as the fall of 1998, California's maverick initiative activist began working out a crafty plan. He'd entice Republicans to support his desire for comprehensive campaign finance reform by linking it to the GOP's fondest wish — redistricting reform.

Linking up with former Democratic Acting Secretary of State Tony Miller, Unz took the novel step of submitting four different versions of his initiative to the attorney general for

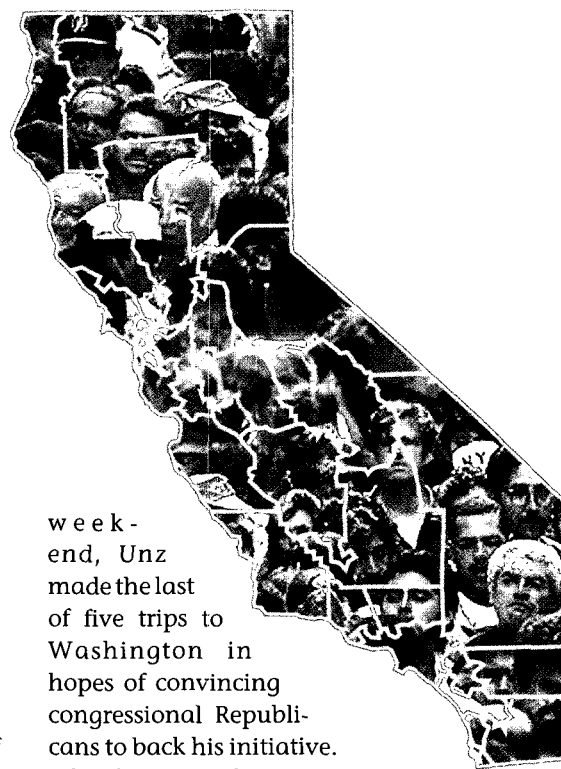
the creation of a title and summary. In addition to a "clean" version of campaign reform, Unz's quartet of submissions also threw in a proposal to put redistricting in the hands of special court-appointed masters. The plan was similar to that adopted by the state Supreme Court in 1991, when political district lines were last drawn.

"Unz is still trying to leverage the interested parties, specifically the Republican Party," Jim Knox, director of California Common Cause said at the time. "There's no question that Unz is trying to broker a deal between Republicans and the reform groups."

Those Republicans, however, didn't like campaign finance reform, and they didn't like Ron Unz. At about the time Unz was putting together his package, California's GOP congressional delegation tapped Representative Bill Thomas (R-Bakersfield) to head their efforts to develop a reapportionment plan that could draw GOP support.

Shuttle diplomacy

Just before the Memorial Day



week-end, Unz made the last of five trips to Washington in hopes of convincing congressional Republicans to back his initiative. After his visit, the congressional delegation split over which to back, but almost as soon as Unz left, the congressional representatives closed ranks behind the Thomas plan.

"The issue of taxpayer-funded campaigns is going to go down, and it will regardless of how he tries to spin it," said one GOP consultant. "It was an extortion play [by Unz] and to their credit, they [congressional Republicans] didn't bite."

Thomas' insider victory, however, was not the end of the story. While Unz began circulating the stripped-down reform initiative, he continued to work

had pulled their children out of the school to protest their lack of progress in learning English under the school's bilingual education program. Unz contacted the organizer of the boycott, liberal Episcopal priest Alice Callaghan, and the two wrote an initiative to eliminate bilingual education altogether — Proposition 227.

"I didn't care what his politics were, and didn't care if he was using it for career advantage," said Callaghan.

"That didn't matter. What mattered was getting those kids out of those bilingual classrooms."

Proposition 227 met with fierce opposition from advocates of bilingual education, and most of the education community. It also drew opposition from all four gubernatorial candidates, whose statements were used in a devastating late television blitz bankrolled by A. Jerrold Perenchio, the head of Univision, the state's largest

Spanish-language TV network. The late attacks didn't cost Unz victory, but it did cost him what most pre-election polls suggested he might get — majority support among Latino voters. Still, he won grudging praise even from opponents of his initiative for engaging the debate over bilingual education as an issue of educational quality, rather than bashing it as a racial preference.

"[Unz] took on an ethnically-based

the GOP on behalf of his broader plan. A strategically timed editorial supporting Unz appeared in the *Wall Street Journal*, and Unz received a letter of support from both of California's representatives on the Republican National Committee. Still, all Unz's energy and media savvy were no match for an entrenched political leader like Thomas. "The delegation early on made it clear to Mr. Unz they couldn't support any initiative with taxpayer-financed campaigns," said Thomas' chief of staff Cathy Abernathy. "There wasn't an issue of a choice between the two because we knew we could not put that on California taxpayers."

Unz blames his insider defeat on factionalism within the GOP. "There are so many different power centers within the national Republican Party," Unz said. "Also, I found out that Bill Thomas was a very 'turf-oriented' person."

Despite his setback, though, Unz still hadn't at this writing completely given up on the idea of somehow pulling a rabbit from the hat. He has made much of the slow pace at which Thomas and his allies had gathered financial commitment for his initiative. Republican state legislative leaders have, for all practical purposes, taken a pass on the effort, since Thomas chose to spice up his reapportionment plan with a move to cut legislative salaries. And for all the irritation that Unz has given to the state GOP, there is a strong contingent of party activists who don't think all that highly of Thomas, either.

That Unz would find himself in the middle of such a high-stakes game

is not merely a function of his vaunted Type-A personality. Some GOP critics privately complain that most of the delegation — and indeed much of the national party apparatus — have been asleep at the switch, ignoring the threat posed to the party by unified Democratic leadership in the nation's largest state.

"What's spectacular is that the party has so much to lose, yet so little attention has been paid by those most threatened," said one GOP leader who

asked not to be identified. "Most Republican congressmen have already accepted reapportionment defeat."

Unz says he will likely endorse the Thomas plan if it makes it to the ballot. Whatever happens with redistricting, however, Unz will still be in the game with his stripped-down campaign reform.

"It was a nice idea," he said of his dalliance in the national reapportionment wars. "I thought it would work, but it didn't." 🏠

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**"While I credit him with *smarts*,
I don't credit him with *wisdom or maturity*."**
— Jim Schultz, director of the Democracy Center.



sacred cow without tripping too many racial land mines," said Gregory Rodriguez, senior researcher at Pepperdine University's Institute of Public Policy.

The late advertising blitz gave Unz a taste of the reality of hardball initiative politics. So, for his next trick, Unz decided to get even by adopting campaign finance reform as his next cause. As was the case with bilingual education, Unz started by joining forces with a political opposite, in this case Miller. Borrowing heavily from 1996's voter-approved but court-tossed Proposition 208 (which Miller co-authored), the two teamed up with campaign reform guru Bob Stern to develop what they call the Voters Bill of Rights. Many of its provisions deal with expanded campaign finance and content disclosure — mailers and television ads, for instance, would have to be Internet-accessible within 24 hours of their release. Unz had hoped to include redistricting reform in the mix but, after running into a partisan buzz saw in Washington, dropped the idea and began circulating his "clean" campaign reform.

Modus operandi

Proposition 227 and the effort surrounding campaign finance reform reveal much about Unz's political style — and his personal quirks. From a strategic standpoint, both represent examples of what Unz refers to as "diagonal" politics. In his two forays into initiative politics, Unz has built counter-intuitive coalitions which thumb their collective noses at more traditional partisan formations. Unz concedes part of his purpose is to draw media attention to his projects.

"When people say the standard party line on something, it's almost background noise," said Unz. "Putting together an odd coalition gets more attention for what you're talking about."

Critics suggest Unz is more inter-

ested in the attention-getting qualities of these coalitions than the policy they produce. Their take is that Unz represents the worst aspects of the initiative process — an ego with a checkbook. "While I credit him with *smarts*, I don't credit him with *wisdom or maturity*," said Jim Schultz, director of the San Francisco-based Democracy Center. "I have seen him play fast and loose with the facts just to make a sound bite he likes." Some critics believe Unz's real objective in pushing his ideas in the initiative process is to lay the groundwork for another run for elective office, either another try for governor or the U.S. Senate. Unz admits he is interested in the idea of running for office down the road, but maintains his current focus is on his initiative projects. Still others believe Unz is just riding the process for the ego rush.

Unz's ego has also given him a reputation for being arrogant and unwilling to listen to the advice of others. When asked about her working relationship with Unz during the Proposition 227, Callaghan paused long and hard before finally responding that the two had "worked together successfully for two years." GOP operatives negotiating with Unz over his campaign reform proposals were a good deal less diplomatic, accusing Unz of being dismissive toward suggestions offered by state legislators. "It had to be his way, or no way at all," said one GOP consultant familiar with the negotiations.

"He has a tendency to boredom, and he's not a great conciliator," said one observer close to the Proposition 227 campaign.

Casting against type

Yet virtually all who know him, whether they be friend or foe, say it is unwise to simply dismiss Unz as just another high-handed millionaire. His personal lifestyle, for instance, is decidedly un-millionaire-like. He works

and lives in what is, by all accounts, a sparsely-furnished home, and promotes himself and his causes largely through the Internet. For all the talk of his big ego, Unz travels without entourage, driving himself around the state in a black Nissan Sentra, wolfing down Burger King meals between campaign stops.

Unz is also a virtual one-man band when it comes to his day-to-day campaigning. During the Proposition 227 campaign, he handled most of the press calls and just about all of the campaign debates himself. He proudly talks of how "I hired myself at a salary of \$1" as the Proposition 227 political consultant and designed the campaign's direct mail advertisements himself. The man just seems to have been born without an "off" switch.

"I think he probably doesn't sleep at all," said Miller.

The idea that an ascetic, obsessive, egotistical computer nerd — with or without entourage — would have so much influence over California's policy agenda creates more than a little angst among some in the political world. "It is dangerous for the power [of the initiative process] to be used as an expensive hobby," said Schultz. But others suggest Unz's self-styled political activism actually returns the initiative process to its roots since most of the big money in Unz's campaigns has been on the other side.

"All the money in the world isn't going to sell the public on an initiative they don't like," said Kim Alexander, director of the non-profit California Voter Foundation. "With 227, he was in the right place in the right time with the right message. Sometimes it takes an outsider coming in sideways to sniff out an opportunity like that."

And if there's one thing Ron Unz knows how to do, it's sniff out an opportunity. 🏠

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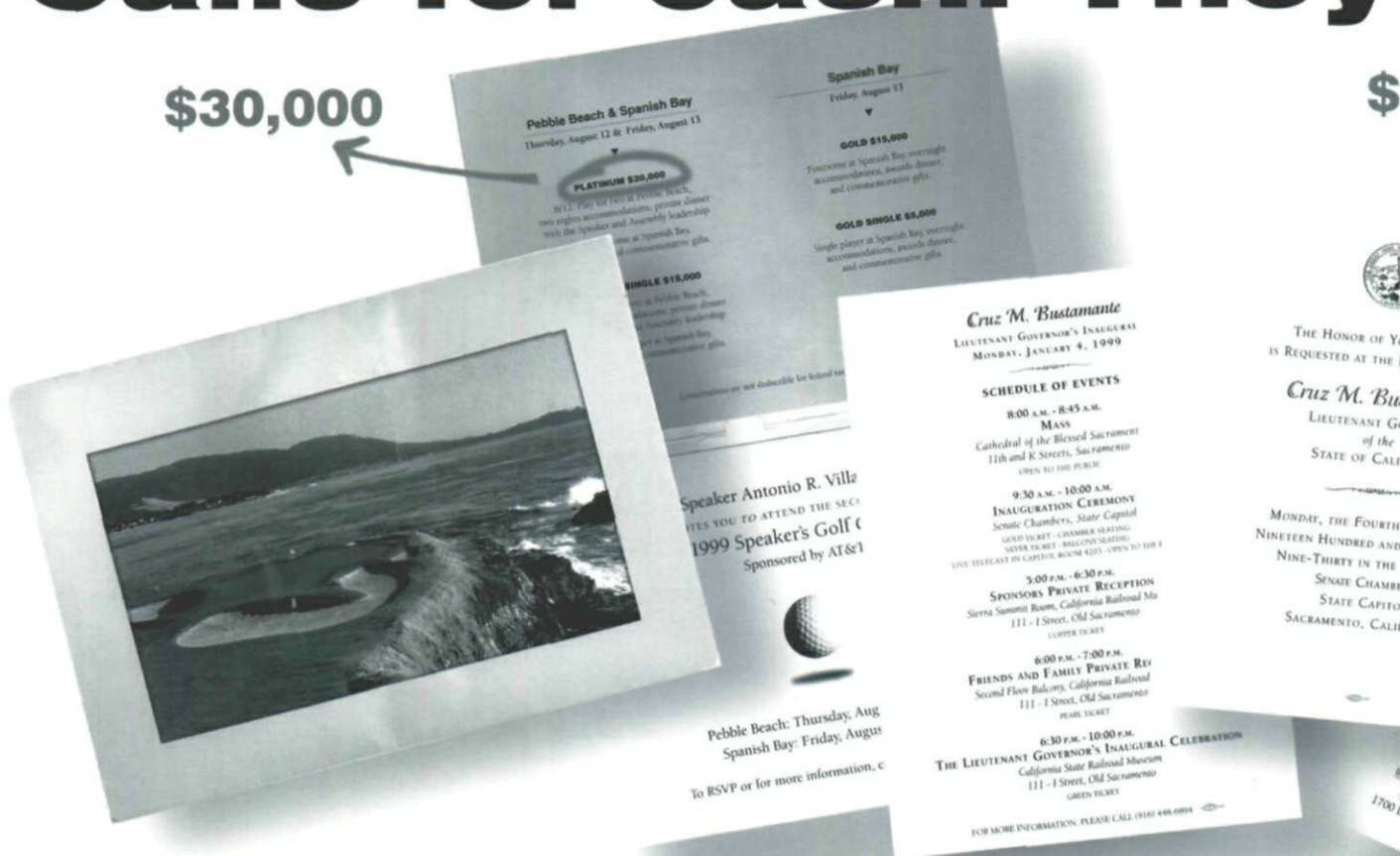
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Calls for cash: They



Politicians claim they have no choice but to ask donors for higher and higher sums due to rising costs of campaigning. Critics counter the practice amounts to “thinly veiled extortion.”

“Roses are red, violets are blue. As a supporter, you have always been true. For a thousand a pop, it’s food, drink and wine. As we toast a new session, be Jackie’s valentine.”

— Fundraising invitation from state Senator Jackie Speier (D-Hillsborough)

Old Sacramento’s Firehouse restaurant is a place where local residents have held countless celebrations — with only a casual nod to the price. But at one of those parties — a birthday bash fund raiser for Assemblyman Tony Cardenas (D-Sylmar) — the price of admission went from upscale to downright unprecedented: Buyers of “host” tickets shelled out \$50,000, “sponsors” paid \$25,000 and “supporters” forked over \$5,000 a plate. But you can’t accuse Cardenas of being elitist: Some guests slipped in the door for a mere \$1,000, and even those with measly \$100 checks were implored to “come, please.”

If Cardenas’ admission prices, which netted \$150,000 that night, seem a tad high, rest assured they are not out of