

The Davis principle

When candidate Gray Davis ran for governor last year, his campaign came up with a snazzy hood ornament — no doubt grounded in the musings of a gazillion focus groups — that synthesized the mood of voters in four historic words:

“Experience money can’t buy.”

It wasn’t just a slogan. Davis had experience, buckets of it. He was the kid who learned the biz by working his way up from the political loading dock: Tom Bradley’s mayoral campaign finance director, Governor Jerry Brown’s chief of staff, legislator, state controller, U.S. Senate candidate, lieutenant governor.

Plenty of seasoning, both administrative and political.

But six months into his new job, Governor Gray Davis is leaving open the possibility that none of that voluminous political experience helped him develop a sense of judgment.

Davis’ political instincts have always seemed a trifle suspect despite his relentless and triumphant ascent up the political ladder. Prior to 1998, Davis’ route to success traveled the line of least resistance as he ran against weak opponents for second-tier jobs. When he ventured into tougher arenas, he was shellacked in Democratic primaries for state treasurer (by the late Jesse Unruh in 1974) and U.S. Senate (by Dianne Feinstein in 1992). Even in 1998, Davis had the good fortune to draw opponents, both in the primary and in November, who insisted on running backwards (see *CJ*, December 1998).

The Davis administration sees it differently. One official contends that Davis has superb political instincts and cites as evidence his four-bill education package and his defrosting of relations with Mexico — both accomplished with alacrity in 1999. The former, as most in the education community will attest, contained more hat than cattle and merely winked at the yawning needs of public education. The latter, however, represents a significant achievement for which Davis deserves the lion’s share of credit.

But do these two exploits imply sound political judgment?

Consider this as background material: In the heat of the 1992 senatorial primary against Feinstein, Davis committed one of the most insipid political blunders of the decade — a dreadful TV ad that compared his likeable and popular opponent with jailed New York hotelier Leona Helmsley. Far

from hurting Feinstein, the attack backfired on its perpetrator, who was scalded for a hit piece that common sense — not to mention political judgment — suggested ought to be stuffed through a shredder.

Okay, that was then; this is now.

• *The pay-raise flap.* During his campaign, Davis heavily criticized a 31 percent pay increase authorized for the new governor by an independent commission. In his first Sacramento press conference following the election, however, Davis indicated that he would pocket most of the raise. At the same time, he warned state employees — most of whom had been without a bump since Andrew Jackson’s presidency — that once again they might have to do without. The reaction — derision, in most quarters — was immediate. Thus did the governor-elect generate a wealth of negative publicity and irritate a labor ally over a few thousand dollars in salary. It seems a veteran politician with superb political judgment would have seen this coming and accepted the old salary.

• *Cruz Bustamante.* Davis’ most tangled political knot as governor tethered him to the newly elected lieutenant governor, Democrat Cruz Bustamante, and to the appeal of a lower federal court decision striking down Proposition 187 — the 1994 initiative that denied a variety of benefits to illegal immigrants and is regarded as a symbol of anti-immigrant and anti-Latino sentiment. Early on, Bustamante publicly insisted that Davis drop the appeal, which had been pursued by the initiative’s champion and Davis’ predecessor, Republican Pete Wilson. Davis was caught between Bustamante’s prodding, fear of alienating the majority of voters who supported 187, and various legal opinions that indicated only an appellate court decision could void an amendment to the state constitution. Ultimately, Davis devised a Solomonic outcome: He cut the baby in two, sending the entire dispute to a mediation panel that will try to divine common ground where none truly exists.

In the process, Davis virtually ignored Bustamante until moments before holding a press conference to announce his decision. At that point, he reportedly invited the lieutenant governor and others to a meeting. Bustamante refused to attend and for weeks thereafter expressed his outrage

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by A.G. Block



over the decision. In addition, Davis' administration poured gasoline on the smoldering Bustamante by stripping his staff of nine parking places in the Capitol garage, while Davis himself vetoed some \$800,000 from Bustamante's budget. The resulting dust-up has fostered frigid relations between the state's two highest-ranking elected officials.

Could the confrontation have been avoided? Perhaps not. But it seems that a wiser politician at least might have tried to defuse the situation by applying a little statesmanship and a small dose of courtesy. What, for instance, would it have cost Davis to walk down the hall to the lieutenant governor's office — say, while he was still wrestling with the 187 decision — to discuss his legal quandary? How might Bustamante have reacted had Davis been frank about his options, then asked for help even though the two might continue to disagree?

An administration official scoffed at the notion, saying that the lieutenant governor has no power, so why bring him into the loop? This argument, of course, doesn't come within an area code of the point. In political terms, the lieutenant governor wasn't snubbed. Rather, the person snubbed was the highest-ranking elected Latino official in California at precisely the moment when Latinos are exercising serious political muscle on behalf of the governor's party. Davis' apparent failure to recognize the importance of civility and courtesy in crafting a key political relationship — or worse, to disregard their significance — also doesn't inspire much confidence in his judgment.

• *The Legislature.* The coin of the realm inside the Capitol is the value of one's word. Nothing else much matters. If a politician can't be trusted, he or she can't function, and someone with 25 years of training ought to appreciate that concept and take extra steps to guard his reputation. Yet Davis somehow emerged from the recent budget process with the value of his word shredded

among both Republicans and Democrats, who accuse him of renegeing on deals (Republicans over district pork vetoed from the final plan; Democrats over enabling legislation — a "trailer bill" dealing with elderly immigrants). Davis argues that he never signed off on the pork or the bill; lawmakers insist otherwise. Either way, Davis appears amateurish, for an experienced negotiator doesn't leave the table until he is assured that everyone views the final product in precisely the same terms.

One veteran legislator referred to the governor's handling of the budget as "politically clumsy" — a term often heard these days regarding the breadth of Davis' relationship with the Legislature. But "clumsy" may not adequately describe the artless way he has treated a peer branch of government. In mid-July, for instance, his minions called Senate and Assembly committee chairs, asking that certain bills be held up. Unfortunately, they neglected to consult with either the bills' authors or legislative leadership, another indication that "respect" and "manners" are foreign concepts to this administration. "Clumsy" and "artless" are not words one would think to ascribe to a seasoned politician with supposedly sound political judgment.

As assemblyman, controller and lieutenant governor, Gray Davis lurked on the fringe of government where he was not required to make difficult decisions or exercise much in the way of political judgment except as it might affect his own career. Nor was he required to articulate a vision for California.

Governor Davis, however, must do all those things. And although it still is very early in his tenure as the state's chief executive, he was, by virtue of his own campaign slogan, expected to bring to the job experience and judgment befitting his quarter century in the trenches of California politics.

Instead, he may be on the verge of writing another chapter of "The Peter Principle." 🏛️

The Capitol Game (continued)

the business end of a stiff Republican challenge in the next election. On the other hand, had you ended the game with a substantial amount of money in the bank — regardless of what may have happened to your bill — you could scare off most serious opponents.

By the same token, if you represented a safe Democratic district (B or E) and ended the game with no money but a bill signed into law, you had a marginally successful rookie campaign. But you may have enjoyed an even more successful year — even if your bill failed — had you banked a lot of money and socked away a pile of political chits. Then you would be able to dispense favors to other

Democratic members and be positioned to move into leadership. You never know; in this era of term limits and revolving-door legislators, you could be speaker.

Finally, if you ended the game with no money, no chits and your bill shredded by one house or the other, not much likely went your way and you can consider your rookie year a failure.

For those who haven't yet tried "The Capitol Game," we urge you to, and to tell us about the experience. Send your thoughts to edit@statenet.com. We plan to periodically add or revise portions of the game and will let you know where on our website those revisions may be found. 🏛️

— A.G. Block

Willie 'n' Clint

It certainly doesn't have the historical significance or media sizzle of a Hillary vs. Rudy U.S. Senate race. But as political side shows go, the November 1999 San Francisco mayoral contest promises to be more illuminating, and in its own way perhaps more compelling, than the bare-knuckles brawl that awaits New Yorkers next year.

For sheer entertainment, it's hard to beat a race that pits the current mayor, Willie L. Brown Jr.; the former mayor, Frank Jordan; and the former mayor's political consultant, Clint Reilly, against each other and 18 lesser-known souls who have declared their initial intent to run. In the latter category is one A.D. Wyatt Norton, founder of the Jeffersonian Interdependent Party, whose campaign web site proclaims: "We are taxed enough to demand a higher quality comedy at City Hall."

The final filing deadline is August 6, by which time Jordan could be out and Board of Supervisors President Tom Ammiano, a gay stand-up comic, or Supervisor Leland Yee, an Ammiano ally, could be in. Jordan, a Republican trounced by Brown in a run-off four years ago, would be competing for the moderate voters Reilly is courting, while Ammiano presumably would siphon off some of Brown's support among liberals and gays.

Amusing as that kind of free-for-all might be in a town where pitched ideological battles are waged over the location of neighborhood dog parks, the more likely prospect seems to be a head-on contest between Brown and Reilly, the only challenge: with enough money to mount a serious campaign. Reilly has said from the beginning that he would not abide by San Francisco's \$600,000 voluntary spending limit, and when his campaign exceeded the \$300,000 trigger in June, city officials formally lifted the cap for all candidates.

Under provisions of the 1995 campaign-finance law, Brown, who had previously agreed to abide by the limits, now is free to spend as much as he likes and to raise the money in increments of \$500. Reilly, because of his choice to exceed the limits, is constrained from accepting contributions larger than \$150-a-pop. Given Brown's prodigious fund-raising abilities and the fortune Reilly has amassed from years of pricey political consulting and savvy real-estate investment, the dollars should flow freely on both sides.

But it's not money, per se, that makes this race fascinating. For political insiders, particularly those

who don't live or vote in San Francisco, the draw is watching Reilly attempt to transform himself from hardball practitioner to populist candidate. Barely known to average voters — which is why he already is running TV bio and issue spots — Reilly trained a whole cadre of Democratic political operatives in the 1980s and is both admired and despised among those who hired him to advance their candidacies or causes.

He is the consultant who "fired" his candidate, Dianne Feinstein, during the middle of her 1990 gubernatorial campaign, faxing the news to reporters before informing her. Credited with innovations in the design and targeting of direct mail, he was renowned in consulting circles for the hefty commissions he received on it. In 1993, as manager of the successful first-term campaign of Los Angeles Mayor Richard Riordan, Reilly produced a lavish issues booklet on paper so costly that reporters coined the term "Riordan stock" to lampoon it. In 1994 he took over Kathleen Brown's foundering gubernatorial campaign, leaving it so cash-strapped in the final weeks that she could not afford critical TV buys.

As a candidate, Reilly clearly lacks the retail political skills a flamboyant operator such as Brown has had decades to hone, not to mention the obvious advantages of incumbency. Brown has the endorsements of the Democratic establishment, from President Bill Clinton on down, and, despite troubling poll numbers, would have to be judged the odds-on favorite in November.

But the booming San Francisco economy that has allowed Brown to boast he's a one-of-a-kind mayor in a one-of-a-kind city masks a set of bread-and-butter local problems for which the voters hold their mayor accountable. Chief among them is the ever-malfunctioning municipal railway system, which Reilly has seized upon, along with the perennial issue of homelessness, as symbols of Brown's governance failures. In doing so, Reilly has tapped into a deep vein of resentment among working and middle-class San Franciscans who see themselves and their neighbors displaced by the prosperous newcomers Brown has helped attract.

Brown did not create those long-simmering tensions, but Reilly's ability to exploit them at the mayor's expense makes this race more than a passing curiosity. 🏛️

by Susan Rasky



Reilly is both
admired and
despised among
those who
hired him to
advance their
candidacies or
causes.

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