

Echoes of the past

Is the 2002 campaign for governor a rerun?

By Lou Cannon

The campaign manager told the Democratic governor it was risky to meddle in the Republican primary. But a political consultant who was not risk averse warned the governor that he faced defeat if Republicans nominated a moderate former mayor. The consultant offered to discredit the moderate and help a novice conservative win the GOP primary. The governor agreed.

This happened in February 1966. The governor was Edmund G. (Pat) Brown, and the Republican moderate was George Christopher, a former mayor of San Francisco. The conservative was Ronald Reagan, an actor and one-time Democrat who in 1964 had become an overnight conservative hero with a splashy, nationally televised speech for Barry Goldwater, the Republican presidential nominee. Goldwater lost in a landslide, however, and polls showed that Reagan also would lose to Brown. The polls were wrong. After disposing of Christopher in the primary, Reagan beat Brown by a million votes.

Thirty-six years later, wistful Republicans are hoping that Bill Simon can stage a historical replay. Simon ran a smart campaign and his principal rival Richard Riordan, ran a dreadful one, but the big player in the GOP primary was Democratic Governor Gray Davis, who spent \$10 million on television ads aimed at destroying Riordan, a moderate former mayor of Los Angeles. Beware of what you wish for, say Simon's managers, who have cast Simon in the role of Reagan. Democratic strategists and various commentators have dismissed this as wishful thinking. Some of them compare Simon to Dan Lungren, who Davis demolished in 1998 (with help from Lungren) by depicting him as an extremist.

So, which is it? Is Simon a Lungren rerun, or can he emulate Reagan and win the governorship? Using the traditional definition of analogy — a comparison in which the similarities outweigh the differences — both sides can make a case.

First, the similarities. Brown's operatives impugned Christopher, a dairy owner, by planting stories about ancient (and largely trivial) violations of milk-pricing laws. This had the unintended consequence of uniting Republicans, who were then, as now, divided along ideological lines. Christopher told me he lacked enthusiasm for Reagan but supported him, and he urged other moderates



Pat Brown on the campaign trail in the 1960s. Bancroft Library photo.

to do likewise because he resented Brown's attack. The Davis campaign may have been similarly unifying. Riordan, who harshly attacked Simon during the primary campaign, congratulated him after it was over and promised to help him defeat Davis. Another similarity is that Davis, like Brown did then, has low approval ratings. Brown, despite towering achievements, was seen as indecisive in dealing with urban riots and campus disorders. Davis, with more modest accomplishments, suffers from a perception that he was slow on the switch in dealing with the energy crisis. And also like Brown, Davis is burdened by an unbalanced budget and a skeptical Legislature. Brown's fiscal solution in 1966 was an accounting gimmick to delay new taxes; in the post-Enron climate Davis will have to do better than that.

There are similarities between the Republicans as well. Simon, while not Reagan's equal as a charmer, comes across as friendly and sincere. Like Reagan, he clings to core ideas and preaches limited government and low taxes. On the downside, Simon resembles Reagan in his ignorance of government, although Reagan worked hard to fill his knowledge gaps. Will Simon? Voters are often charitable to candidates who try, and Reagan didn't suffer from

his inexperience. "The other guy has the experience," Reagan said cheerfully. "That's why I'm running."

But there are monumental differences between the 1966 and 2002 campaigns. For starters, Brown's involvement in the GOP primary was surreptitious — his operatives leaked anti-Christopher material to columnist Drew Pearson. When reporters traced this to Brown, it damaged his reputation as a straight shooter. Davis' anti-Riordan commercials were savage — and an ad claiming that crime had increased in Riordan's years as mayor demonstrably false — but the governor and his strategists operated openly. They announced they would stop Riordan because they feared him in the general election, and they did.

Another and more crucial difference is that Reagan was far better known than Simon is today and, therefore, more difficult to demonize. In 1966, anyone over 25 remembered Reagan as a handsome movie star who had

and South.

Simon will try to make the incumbent the issue, as Reagan did with Brown (and later President Jimmy Carter). He might do well to imitate Reagan, who extolled conservatives to try the "soft sell" and throughout the 1966 campaign described himself as a "citizen-politician." A ray of hope for Republicans is that Simon appears to have learned a lesson from Lungren's demise and goes out of his way to avoid discussion of social issues, especially abortion. Simon campaign consultant Sal Russo, a 19-year-old advance man for Reagan in 1966, says his focus groups show that Davis lacks credibility. But will voters accept a Republican who has rarely voted and is trying to start his political career at the top? On the face of it, Simon doesn't have a story to tell equivalent to Reagan — a success in radio, movies, and television who was active in politics long before his speech for Goldwater. The biggest plus for Simon, the son of a famous father, is that he served under then-U.S. attorney Rudolph Giuliani, now an American icon.

While Simon may not be a Reagan, Davis even less resembles the personable Pat Brown, one of California's most visionary governors. Even when Brown was on the ropes politically, he was still beloved by many Democrats. Davis does not evoke similar emotions.

Today's political landscape is similar in some respects and different in others from the one inhabited by Brown and Reagan. Now, there are 21.5 million registered voters, three times more than in 1966. Democrats then had a much greater registration margin over Republicans than they do today — 17 percent compared to 9 percent — but significant numbers of conservative Democrats often voted for Republican candidates. In 1966, there were few registered independents ("decline to state").

Today, independents are nearly 15 percent of the electorate and hold the balance of power. Latinos, then called "Mexican-Americans" or "Hispanics," were a tiny fraction of the electorate, but Reagan competed for their votes and won at least a third of them, as he would later do in presidential campaigns. Simon probably needs to make heavy inroads among Latinos to win.

On balance, there are more differences between 1966 and 2002 than similarities, and Davis vs. Simon fails to qualify as a rerun of Brown vs. Reagan. The Reagan analogy is understandably appealing to victory-starved Republicans, but the candidates and the situation are different. Reagan is not clonable. If Simon is to win in November, he will have to do it on his own. 🏠

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Ronald Reagan being sworn in as governor of California, 1967. Bancroft Library photo.

usually played, in the words of Garry Wills, "the heart-warming role" of himself. And Reagan stayed in the public eye after his film career as host of *General Electric Theater*, a top-rated television program. Brown alternately portrayed Reagan as a right-wing extremist and a lightweight actor who had been upstaged by a chimpanzee in the 1951 movie *Bedtime for Bonzo*, but neither approach impressed voters. Reagan, unlike Goldwater, wasn't scary, and most Californians had a higher opinion of Hollywood — and Reagan's movies — than Brown realized.

Davis has signaled he will try to define Simon as "an untested businessman who happens to be anti-choice, pro-gun, pro-deregulation and pro-voucher." The governor has the money (\$28 million) and a campaign strategist (Garry South) with the skills to do this. This, too, is a difference. Brown's 1966 campaign lacked discipline, with authority divided between an old friend of the governor and the campaign manager. Don't expect that from Davis

Republican cause

Soap Box is an occasional feature to showcase some of the most intriguing California leaders in their own words. In this issue, the Journal invited Bill Jones, California secretary of state and a Republican candidate for governor in the March primary, to share some thoughts about his campaign and other issues.

By Bill Jones, Secretary of State

It has been nearly one year since I made public my decision to run for governor of California. When I announced my intention last March, I did so for one reason: to replace Gray Davis with a leader who has the expe-

rience and vision to turn California towards better, more prosperous times. We need to replace Gray Davis with an individual who wants to govern California, not just be governor of California.

Gray Davis is a perpetual candidate who has been running for higher office his whole professional career, ignoring policy matters, issues and needs of long-term importance to Californians. I chose a different path.

As California's secretary of state, my highest priorities have been to clean the voter rolls, improve participation for those who have historically been underrepresented in the electoral process, and be a leader for campaign finance reform by making the Internet a valuable tool for tracking campaign contributions, allowing voters to make informed decisions by viewing special-interest donations. My focus was on reform, and providing the people of California with an Elections Office that was top-notch and above reproach.

As a public servant for more than 20 years, the people of California have always been my first priority. Governor Davis' obsession with fund raising and building his political war chest has made it so that almost any candidate who wants to stand a legitimate chance against him this November, must be willing to spend millions of his or her own personal fortune to be competitive.

After my experience with this election, I do believe we must level the playing field so that all candidates running for political office have an equal chance, and that lesser-funded, but equally talented and knowledgeable candidates are not discouraged from seeking office.

While I continue to vigorously oppose public financing of campaigns, I do believe that if signifi-

cant changes are not made, public cynicism towards campaigns and elected officials will only grow. The Internet is one tool I believe all candidates can use to effectively communicate their message and reach out to all voters. It will probably require legislation to make this a reality. I also think we need to look at giving equal television and radio time to candidates who prove to be legitimate contenders.

Although I may no longer be in the race to replace Gray Davis, the goal to defeat him in November remains my top priority. To that end, I have agreed to be one of Bill Simon's campaign

co-chairs. Unlike Davis, Bill Simon has a plan and a vision for California. He knows where he wants to lead California, and he will lead us from this mess that Gray Davis has gotten us into. I fully support Simon in his bid to unseat Davis, and I believe he can do so. The issues that made Gray Davis vulnerable in the first place are still issues today.

The governor still has no long-term plan to solve California's future energy needs, he has no plan to address our infrastructure needs and he has yet to show us how he plans to solve California's budget woes. Bill Simon has the plans and I believe the people of California will unite behind him to replace Gray Davis.

As my tenure as secretary of state comes to a close next January, Californians can be confident in the knowledge that in the time I have remaining I will be outspoken and continue to clearly define the differences between Republican solutions and Democrat failures, and the differences between Bill Simon and Gray Davis. Davis has put the future of our children and grandchildren at risk, leaving them not with our state's golden promise, but with an enormous debt and an abysmal school system.

It has been my honor to serve California for more than two decades. Next January I will leave Sacramento to spend time with my family on the ranch in Fresno. I am a third-generation California farmer and rancher, and it has been a great life for me, teaching me the values and respect for hard-working people, the land, the air and water. I have spent almost half my life serving the state of California and rest assured I will continue to do all that I can to ensure that California regains its golden reputation and promise for our future generations. 🏠

