

California Politics:

How the West Was Lost

California's statewide and federal election campaigns usually can be counted on to stir up some passions within the state and interest, if not fascination, around the country. California, as the most populous state, offers the biggest electoral vote prize in presidential races and sends the largest delegations to party nominating conventions. California's governor is at least a "contender" for his party's top nominations. Beyond that, the state is often held to be a kind of America in miniature as well as a matrix for national social and cultural changes. Finally, there is a political style once thought of as peculiar to California—let's call it the anti-party style. This has, the political scientists tell us, now been adopted nearly everywhere in the United States, and it makes some sense to hint that whatever is coming down in this state will soon enough be falling everywhere.

But the 1974 races in California have not yet and probably will not generate the old excitement. Watergate's poisonous steams and mists envelop all politics in endless miasma. A reporter going door-to-door in the precincts during August and September is stunned by the political impenetrability of the voters. Do not call it apathy; it is an envenomed rejection of politics and politicians. The economy is

sick and people are hurting. Most of them will do what they have done in such a situation since 1930, vote Democratic. This robs the elections everywhere: and notably in California, of an element of doubt or surprise. The Democrats will win up and down the line. U.S. Senator Alan Cranston should be reelected by a landslide. No Democratic congressional seat appears to be in danger: the Republicans might lose as many as three. The Democrats should wind up with better than nominal control of the two houses of the state legislature. Apart from one of the statewide administrative offices, only the race for governor has the look of a contest and that race, too, has so far failed to stir the turned-off voters.

Neither Democratic candidate Edmund G. Brown, Jr., California's secretary of state and the son of former Governor Edmund G. (Pat) Brown, nor Houston I. Flournoy, the incumbent controller and the Republican contender, has what anyone could call a popular following. To a reporter sampling opinion in the precincts a typical comment ran, "What did you say the name of that guy is who's running against Pat Brown?" This is even more grievous for Flournoy. As if Watergate, the economy, and the record of the Republican incumbent, Ronald Reagan, were not deadly

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enough incubi for him to carry, he faces an opponent without the problem of "name identification." Still, just because of the character of the two candidacies, the race does bear some watching.

First of all, an era, the Reagan era, will come to an end no matter who wins the gubernatorial election. Reactionary, pitiless, and benighted, Reagan could never quite wholly impose his own bleak vision on the diverse and restless people of California. A legislature loosely managed by his political enemies, a state court system long admired for excellence at its appellate levels, such organized interests as labor, public employees, teachers, and conservation groups, a generally competent press corps in the state, along with the voters themselves, combined to hold Reagan in some kind of check. In addition, his own silly and arrogant ambition for a presidential nomination forced him to brake his sanguinary impulses. He might draw hoarse, exultant roars from GOP fatcats with his calls for a "bloodbath" for dissident students or an "outbreak of botulism" in the turkeys wrapped for distribution to urban poor people in response to SLA demands, but he could not openly turn such inhumanity into steady policy without dooming his presidential hopes. The American people, fortunately, were not ready for the real Ronald Reagan.

Reagan did accomplish in his eight years as governor the virtual dismantling of state government as a humane, responsive instrument of the immediate needs of the ordinary people of the state. With him in Sacramento, of course, there was not even a chance that the state government might be more than simply responsive to needs. That it might be an agency of social and economic justice, an unguent for the frictions of social life, a finder of pathways to the good society, were thoughts alien to his sensibility. He both embodied and appealed to the worst that is in us: greed, heartlessness, and a sullen determination to hold on to what one has and to hell with everybody else. That was Reaganism. Some will mourn it; some will not.

[RETURN TO THE OLD REGIME]

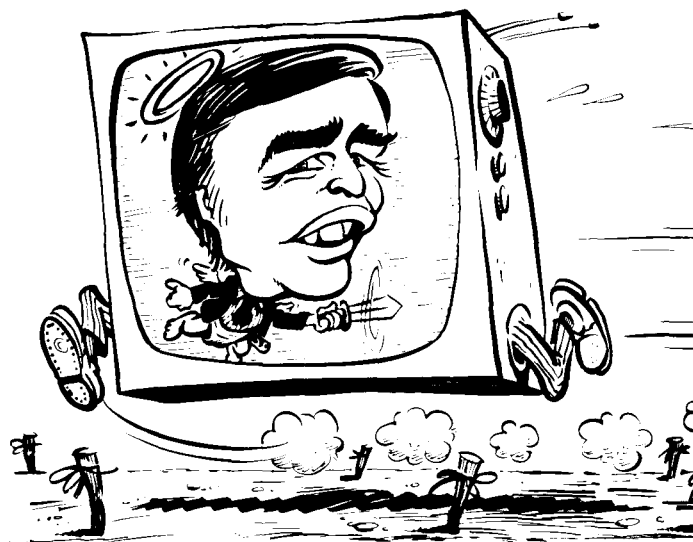
Obviously, the election of Jerry Brown (as he is usually called) means a pretty dramatic break with Reaganism. At the very least, a Brown administration would mean a return to the old regime of the Democratic liberals, to an administration not unlike that of Jerry's father, Edmund G. (Pat) Brown, who was governor from 1959 to 1967. It clearly grates on Jerry Brown's nerves when people easily assume that he is basically a younger, trimmer, more modern version of Pat. But irritating though that assumption may be, it means votes, a whole lot of them, for Jerry. In fact, more than a few registered Democrats this November will go into the polling booth to vote for Edmund G. Brown, Jr., thinking that they are casting a vote for good old Pat. Many, many more will vote for Jerry with Pat on their minds: Pat and a time, not long ago, which seems now almost halcyon compared with the dark night of the soul through which the American people have labored since 1966. Brown and his advisers are aware of what might be called the "nostalgia effect" surrounding his candidacy and are not above playing to it in order to corral all the votes possible from the normal con-

stituencies of the Democrats.

Not everyone agrees that a Flournoy victory would also mean a break with Reaganism. Writing in *California Journal*, Ed Salzman, one of the most respected of California political writers, looks for "... no drastic or immediate change," and, noting that Reagan has promised to campaign hard for Flournoy, does not think that Flournoy will engage in any wholesale firing of Reagan appointees or move to dismantle what Reagan called his "Creative Society" programs. But Flournoy is no Reagan. Flournoy's close friends insist that privately Hugh, as he is called, was anguished by Reagan's prolonged and fatuous defense of Nixon. To an interviewer who asks, Flournoy will allow that he likes to think of himself as being in the Earl Warren mold of Republicanism rather more than Reagan's. Plenty of Democratic liberals in the legislature will, if asked, admit that the prospect of a Flournoy administration does not seem terrifying to them. One lobbyist, himself a long-time liberal Democrat with close ties to the liberals in the legislature, told me that he was seriously thinking of voting for Flournoy in preference to Brown. None of this is meant to suggest that Flournoy is actually going to make a serious dent in the liberal constituency, or that he is, in fact, another Earl Warren. What it does suggest is that he is not likely to follow closely in the footsteps of Reagan, that even in the event of a Republican victory in November the Reagan era will have come to a close.

[DE TOCQUEVILLE'S AMERICANS]

Reaganism was a California phenomenon of the Sixties. It anticipated Nixonism by a couple of years and was always more primitive than Nixonism, more romantic, if you will. As we learn more and more about Watergate, the outline of a Nixonian vision appears Gaullist and megalomaniacal; it was of a society reshaped in the image of the corporation and run from the White House, with Congress, courts, parties, and media reduced to impotence and voters mystified and manipulated. It would be the apotheosis of the administrative state, the



end of politics. Reaganism itself was never quite so grandiose or systematic as Nixonism, despite the affinities between the two. In Reaganism the interaction can be seen between the general sense of social movement of the Sixties and its peculiarly Californian political milieu.

Californians are too numerous and too politically diverse to be lumped into any single category. This state, after all, has a pretty good claim to be the stomping ground of America's most virulent right wing, ready to shoot hippies and blacks, sterilize welfare mothers, and canonize Nixon. At the same time it is the incubator and the main attraction of the counter-culture. With a deep bow to the black civil rights movement of the Sixties, moreover, it does not do violence to the truth to say that the social movement of the Sixties owed more to California than to any other state. And we know which state produced Nixon and Reagan.

There is in California, however, an all-pervading privatism that in odd ways unites the counter-culture dropout with the Orange County reactionary. Californians are absorbed by themselves and the pursuit of their individual and wholly private pleasures. They are de Tocqueville's Americans living in a benign climate and backed by an awesome technology but unable to rest because their personal quests for gratification can never be satisfied. It can never be satisfied because the American society, and especially so in California, does not know how *individual* desires can be legitimately harmonized or curbed. Americans do not like social discipline applied to themselves; Californians like it least of all. The institutions of social discipline and concerted will—family, church, community, work, trade union, political party—have always been weak in California. The dissolution of those institutions elsewhere in the land is widely held to be another instance of country following frontier.

California has been preeminently the place where one did not require political action to achieve happiness, success, the cultivation of the self, or the unlimited pursuit of pleasure. Californians wanted good government, of course. Good government was "honest and efficient." Efficient government was government that did not cost too much. Honesty meant that officeholders were not on the take and

were accountable for public monies. Good government could also be enlightened and progressive. Californians spent generously on education, welfare and public health, including mental health. Its penology was far ahead of most states in adherence to the canons of 20th century thought on the matter. Its local governments were thought to be sound and responsive, with patronage and spoils practically unknown. Its system of judicial selection and retention is widely imitated and admired. Its system of higher education was the envy of the world. Its state legislature, particularly its lower house, is still thought by political scientists to be the nation's best. All of this was achieved with a politics of very low affect, very low visibility.

Of course, if politics were neither very visible nor affecting the ordinary Californian, the same was not true for the corporations, for agribusiness, and for the unions and other organized, largely economic, interest groups. The banks, the oil companies, aviation, the merchants and manufacturers, the big farmers, the utilities, the recreation interests, and the land developers were intensely political and far more influential over legislation than any political party or voting bloc. The legislators themselves, without any real party to bind them and support them, are fair game for the organized interests. Legislation in such a situation is the outcome of a complicated relationship among the lobbyists, the vulnerable legislators, and the specialists of the bureaucracies with ties to organized interests. To the ordinary Californian it always seems like a shadow-play in far-away Sacramento, having little to do with their own lives.

In the boom times before 1929, and again after World War II, such a regime could seem benign enough. There were jobs and good wages for those with skills; property was easily acquired and its value constantly appreciated. And there was this golden land with its seductive climate always seeming to whisper that life was made for pleasure and it could all be had with so little effort. If all of those jobs turned out to be shameful or boring or trivial or without meaning, there was always leisure, the household, the beaches and mountains and pleasure palaces. If marriages didn't seem to work in California, we could just make divorce easier. If people were not happy there was therapy, or a change of job, or splitting to some other place, or more frantic consumption, or a new spouse, or a new religion, or a new car, or even a new law. Who could knock it? Sometimes it seemed that the whole world really just wanted what California already had. And because of all that money poured into education the kids were going to have it even better. So it seemed to the vast majority of Californians. Who needed politics?

[END OF THE DREAM]

Who can really say when it all began to sour? A whole lot of people had never really shared in the good times—blacks, chicanos, old people, farm workers, youths without skills, divorced or abandoned mothers—and some of them began to make claims of their own. Suddenly, at the end of the Fifties, it wasn't quite so easy to switch jobs because they were harder to find and, in technological society, skills age fast.

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