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The Recall Circus in California: Why it Matters

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The historic recall election, aimed at removing Gov. Gray Davis, is radical enough—especially when coupled with the fact that the candidates running to replace Davis include a former child actor, a former porn star, and the very current publisher of the very pornographic Hustler magazine, Larry Flynt. Flynt now creepily bills himself as the "smut peddler who cares." This is care we could all do without. The recall election often looks more like a circus parade than a serious political event. But it is deadly serious. [see Sacramento Bee coverage]

After completing his first term in office and narrowly winning re-election, Gov. Gray Davis found himself in hot water. A liberal Democrat famously lacking in personality and personal warmth, Davis had won his first election by a large margin, running on his lengthy political resume. He barely squeaked by in his re-election race, defeating Republican candidate Bill Simon by just over 300,000 votes out of over 6-million cast. Things went from bad to worse after his re-election, and many voters felt that David had lied to Californians about the state's unprecedented budget deficit—now known to be over \$39-billion.

California's state constitution includes a recall provision inserted during the progressivist era—and a tightly organized corps of organizers secured enough signatures on recall petitions to force the election. At that point, it seemed that nearly every citizen of California was ready to run for Davis' job. Some Democrats even toyed with inviting former President Bill Clinton to join the race, but Clinton lacks the required California residency. Frankly, this is perhaps the only election in which Bill Clinton would be one of the less colorful candidates. That ought to tell us something.

After the flaky and scandalous wannabees are removed from consideration, only a handful of candidates remain as serious contenders. Assuming that Gov. Davis is recalled, the main Democratic candidate is Lt. Gov. Cruz Bustamante, another liberal, but no friend of Gov. Davis. Bustamante would be the first Hispanic governor of California in a century, and his candidacy is backed by powerful Native American gambling interests and fearful Democratic strategists, who desperately want to hold on to the Golden State's governor's mansion.

On the Republican side, the scene is dominated by actor Arnold Schwarzenegger, who chose NBC's "Tonight Show" as the platform for the announcement that he would run. Schwarzenegger's international celebrity status and appeal set the stage for a media frenzy during the short campaign. But what should California's voters make of Arnold Schwarzenegger as a candidate? Is Arnold Schwarzenegger a conservative?

Well, only where dollars and taxes are concerned. After a shaky start coached by investment guru Warren Buffett, Schwarzenegger made a firm commitment to cut taxes and restore fiscal sanity to California's out-of-control budget. So far, so good.

It's on social and moral issues that "The Arnold" shifts left—considerably left.

Many in the media tout Schwarzenegger as a new model Republican precisely because of his liberal stands on moral

issues. Newsweek gushed that “Schwarzenegger’s biggest asset is that he’s not ‘Conan the Barbarian’ politically but a moderate Republican whose views are in sync with those of most Californians. He’s pro abortion rights, pro gay adoption, pro environment . . . and a confessed ‘liberal’ on other social issues.” There you have it: Social and moral conservatives are the real barbarians, according to Newsweek. Arnold just played one in the movies. [see extensive Newsweek coverage]

Schwarzenegger is genuinely liberal on a host of “lifestyle” issues like homosexuality. In an interview with *Cosmopolitan* magazine, Arnold said, “I have no sexual standards in my head that say this is good or this is bad. Homosexual—that only means to me that he enjoys sex with a man and I enjoy sex with a woman. It’s all legitimate to me.” Those presenting Schwarzenegger as the new Ronald Reagan will have a hard time living that one down.

He was able to run under the radar on social issues until he officially announced his candidacy. He later answered a litany of questions presented machine-gun style by Sean Hannity of Fox News’ “Hannity and Combs.” His answers revealed a basically secular and liberal worldview, tempered by political reality. Though pro-choice, he would support parental-consent laws and opposes partial-birth abortions. While supporting domestic partnership laws, he would oppose homosexual marriage. His profile on social issues puts him right alongside liberal Republicans and moderate Democrats. California conservatives are in a pinch.

The moral questions surrounding Schwarzenegger’s candidacy grew more complicated when two items from the 1970s came to light. Schwarzenegger, a former “Mr. Olympia” bodybuilder, was featured in “Pumping Iron,” a cult classic of the weight room crowd. In the film, Schwarzenegger bragged of sexual conquests, smoked a marijuana joint, and admitted to using anabolic steroids to build muscle mass. This isn’t exactly Ronald Reagan starring in “Hell Cats of the Navy.”

Another shoe dropped when a 1977 interview with *Oui*—a pornographic men’s magazine—was found, also showing Arnold bragging of sexual promiscuity. The candidate is counting on a forgiving electorate. “I never lived my life to be the governor of California,” he responded. “Obviously, I have made statements that are ludicrous and crazy and outrageous because that’s the way I was . . . I was always out there. I know that people understand that when they read an interview from 1979 or 1977 to differentiate that from today.”

He had better hope so. Schwarzenegger, married to journalist Maria Kennedy Shriver, does seem now to be something of a family man and father to their four children. His films may feature plots of mayhem and violence, but Arnold seems to be happy as a peaceful celebrity and (now, suddenly) a political candidate. Can Californians make the shift with him?

The Schwarzenegger candidacy certainly provides energy and celebrity flair to California’s recall election, but it also raises significant questions of political judgment and Christian conscience. Should California’s conservative voters support Arnold Schwarzenegger just because he is a registered Republican? Should Christians vote for Arnold just because he is (marginally) more pro-life than Gray Davis and Cruz Bustamante? Is political incrementalism a smart strategy, or a sell-out?

California’s recall election may resemble a circus, but serious questions like these require serious consideration. The Golden State’s decision will have nation-wide implications.

