

“The Terminator as Governor”
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Arnold Schwarzenegger’s California recall election gubernatorial victory demonstrates the increasing collapse of the boundaries between entertainment and politics in an era of media spectacle.

Over the past decades, major struggles around politics, race, gender, and sexuality have played out in the media. In the 1990s, the O.J. Simpson trial, the Clinton sex scandals, and the proliferation of tabloid journalism made serious political issues and conflicts the stuff of popular entertainment and culture.

Moreover, presidential politics on the level of campaigns and governing have also exhibited a growing politics of the image and spectacle. In our media-saturated society, politicians become celebrities who fine tune their image through daily photo opportunities, spin out their message of the day, and, like celebrities, employ image management firms to make sure that their performance is playing well with the public.

In an era of media politics, celebrities can become politicians and take on increasingly political roles. Hollywood stars of film and television were prominent opponents of the Bush administration’s 2003 Iraq war, while teams of celebrities were employed by both sides in the California recall election.

Arnold Schwarzenegger had a familiar role to play in the California recall election scenario. The people were angry at higher taxes, energy costs, and what appeared to be a deteriorating economy and were looking for a savior. Arnold presented himself as the hero on the white horse who would ride into California and solve the problems.

His “Rescue California” pitch thus played into a standard action/adventure genre where the outsider lone hero arrives in a chaotic situation and through his agency and magical powers defeats the evil forces, solves the problem, and returns the situation to stability and normalcy.

As with the action-adventure hero of his films, Schwarzenegger appeared as the outsider, not beholden to “special interests.” Arnold was “the terminator” who would stride in, chase out the villains, and restore order to the polis. In the media frenzy surrounding the election, viewers and voters saw Schwarzenegger wade into crowds, make entertaining statements while playing on economic fears and amorphous anger, and repeating to audiences his stock phrases like “Hasta la vista, baby!” (to Gray Davis) or his famous “I’ll be back.”

In particular, men were angry because of economic woes or cultural grievances projected onto women, immigrants, gays and lesbians, or other groups associated with liberals and Democrats. Schwarzenegger presented himself as the tough enforcer who would take on the bureaucrats and “special interests” and restore strong leadership to California.

Schwarzenegger had cultivated a manly, macho image since his days as a professional body-builder and his political persona reflected this ideal.

Five days before the election, The Los Angeles Times published an article citing reports that six women claimed that they had been physically groped by Schwarzenegger on movie sets and over the next few days more women came forward with similar reports, with at least 15 women making the charge against the actor.

Yet evidently revelations of his sexual groping and brutal mistreatment of women only angered his male supporters more. Schwarzenegger represented a macho male action hero and large numbers of men and women identified sexual aggression with manliness. His supporters turned on the messenger, waging a campaign against The Los Angeles Times, claiming that the paper had sat on the reports until the final days of the election to ambush Schwarzenegger, a charge the paper denied.

The mainstream media neglected, however, previous stories published in various tabloids and magazines documenting Schwarzenegger's numerous affairs that went past crude groping, and as Guardian correspondent Duncan Campbell noted in a October 20 report, "stories that appeared in the British tabloid press about alleged love children barely surfaced in the U.S. press." Moreover, U.S. mainstream media also tended to neglect a report that Schwarzenegger met with Enron president Ken Lay and others during the California energy crisis.

Schwarzenegger was enabled in his campaign by culture industry mavens and the sheer amount of daily focus on his spectacle and sound-bytes. He announced his candidacy on the Jay Leno show and the faithful Leno was there to introduce him on election night. His loyal wife Maria Shriver remained by his side and on camera throughout the campaign, deflecting criticisms of Schwarzenegger's brutal treatment of women and assuring the public that Arnold was a "great guy" and "great husband." On the Oprah Winfrey show, Schwarzenegger was able to tell viewers how he brought his wife coffee in bed in the morning as Maria sat by his side beaming. And on the campaign/media trail, one-time liberal actor Rob Lowe tirelessly appeared in the media touting the virtues of his fellow actor.

Schwarzenegger carried the aura of the Kennedy family as his wife Maria Shriver's family turned out to campaign for their son-in-law and celebrities like Rob Lowe endowed Schwarzenegger with the aura of celebrity liberalism, as well as his bed-rock Republican conservatism, long affirmed in his political pronouncements and campaigning for Republicans like George H.W. Bush. Bush I earlier showered Arnold with praise and awarded him a government appointment as physical fitness advisor.

Not only did celebrity royalty promote the Schwarzenegger campaign, but the media followed Schwarzenegger wherever he went and while there was some effort to question him, the broadcasting media dutifully played his daily photo opportunities and lines of the day.

Moreover, rightwing talk radio and an omnipresent media whipped up voters passions to a frenzy and the Schwarzenegger campaign was successfully able to channel voter anger against Governor Gray Davis and to present Schwarzenegger as a viable candidate. Davis was immensely unpopular, so it was relatively easy to blame him, if albeit unfairly, for California's problems. And in the fantasy mindset of media spectacle politics, voters saw Arnold as the hero who would come to the rescue of California, just as he did in films.

In this political morality tale and drama, Schwarzenegger did not have to present actual political positions, although it was no doubt useful that he held his own and was indeed highly entertaining in the one heavily watched political debate. Schwarzenegger campaigned daily, drew large audiences and provided engaging sound bites in the daily media. Getting maximum media exposure while entertaining potential voters helped secure his base and win voters frustrated with politics as usual. Exit polls reveal that Schwarzenegger especially appealed to disenfranchised and cynical youth and men of many income groups and ethnicities. Hence, exposes of predatory sexual behavior following the debate published in the Los Angeles Times and widely publicized seemed to have little effect, perhaps because in the world of Hollywood media spectacle such sexual behavior is expected as part of the movie scene, or perhaps because many men find such behavior acceptable.

Moreover, Schwarzenegger tapped into anger against politics as usual and presented himself as the ultimate anti-political candidate, refusing to take specific positions on issues and serving to position himself as the anti-politics and anti-special interests candidate. Of course, there were specific political advisors, groupings, and interests behind him, ranging from former Gov. Pete Wilson's advisors and staff to energy and land development corporations who wanted a Republican governor in office to pursue their interests and helped fund his campaign.

In addition, as a November 16 Los Angeles Times opinion piece by Josh Benson noted, the Democratic Left turned against Davis as well, angered over his centrist politics and refusal to push a more progressive agenda, despite Democratic party majority. Thus legislators, liberal interest groups, and left-leaning voters shared the distaste for Davis and participated in the populist anger, hoping to send a message to Democrats that they needed to push genuinely progressive agendas to earn their support.

As for the public, they sought a break with politics as usual and choose a celebrity governor, partly because sectors of the U.S. public live in media phantasmagorias and believe in the myths of the strong male hero who will cut through red tape, solve problems, and produce a happy ending. Schwarzenegger symbolized power and strength to many, presenting the hopes of a California rescue fantasy and voters who lived in media fantasy worlds bought into this narrative, embracing the myth while ignoring the disquieting reality that the actor had no political experience and no clearly delineated solutions to California's budget problems.

In any case, Arnold Schwarzenegger is now governor of California. It remains to be seen how Hollywood fantasy scenarios will play out in the day-to-day politics. Working through

complex problems of the budget do not lend themselves to magical solutions and media politics can only go so far in dealing with the problems of the California economy and political system. Once again, California is undergoing an experiment in which the implosion of entertainment, media spectacle, and politics has produced a celebrity actor governor. It is likely the resulting story will provide a cautionary political morality tale about the dangers of celebrity politics just as Schwarzenegger's victory confirms its power in an age of Big Media and Celebrity, but unlike Hollywood films, real politics are complex, open-ended, and difficult to predict.

Of course, having celebrity politicians in California is not novel. Ronald Reagan became governor of the state in the 1960s and went on to become president of the United States. Song and dance man George Murphy became senator of California in the 1960s and singer Sonny Bono of Sonny and Cher fame became a congressman and Clint Eastwood won election as mayor of Carmel, California. The Schwarzenegger campaign, however, was more attuned to the ethos of the actor's action adventure films than in previous celebrity campaigns and there was little of the usual give and take of political debate and media interaction, a fast track spectacle campaign that no doubt aided Schwarzenegger.

Schwarzenegger is famously arrogant and a strong believer in the power of the will. Using exercise regimes and with more than a little help from steroids, Schwarzenegger remade himself into one of the world's premier bodybuilders and then with the help of culture industry promoters became a major Hollywood action hero film star. It remains to be seen if he can emerge from the cocoon of fame and celebrity that envelops him to play the role of politician in the complex and hardball game of California politics. So far, he has shown limited abilities to give and take, compromise, subject his positions to criticism, and reach consensus solutions. Will he be a front man for California Republican politics as usual, an acting governor whose strings are pulled by the usual conservative Republican suspects, or will Schwarzenegger be able to call his own shots and make his own deals? The scenario of the action/adventure political thriller would dictate the latter, but in the real world of partisan California politics many suspect Schwarzenegger is merely a tool for another Republican coup d'etat.

In the current media and celebrity culture, those who ascend to power through media spectacle often are undone by the very forces that elevate them. O.J. Simpson ascended to the pinnacles of media celebrity and was taken down by bad publicity in an intense media morality tale. Stars like Michael Jackson have used the media to cultivate celebrity and watched as the media created career-threatening negative spectacles. Likewise, political spectacles like Bush Senior's Gulf War and his son's 2002 war on Iraq can also flip from spectacles of military triumph to spectacles of quagmire and chaos. The reversal of the spectacle means that spectacle politics are always contestable, subject to negotiation, can get out of control, and switch to their opposites.

As Schwarzenegger becomes governor of California, one of the six major economic powerhouses in the global economy, there will no doubt be intense media focus on him. How he does will in part result from how he controls and uses the media, but also how the media present his policies, actions, and colorful past. Schwarzenegger has allegedly paid

over a million dollars to purchase the original and outtakes from his 1976 film Stay Hungry that allegedly has him singing “Springtime for Hitler” and prancing about in Nazi regalia and poses, and there are Nazi poses of Schwarzenegger floating through the Internet. In an era of political spectacle, image is all and negative images can produce critical views of politicians and their policies as George W. Bush is learning from images of daily carnage and mayhem in Iraq that put in question his foreign policy decisions. Schwarzenegger too will become an important part of the spectacle of contemporary politics and what role he plays will be determined by his policies and politics, the media, and how a volatile and fickle public perceives him.

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