

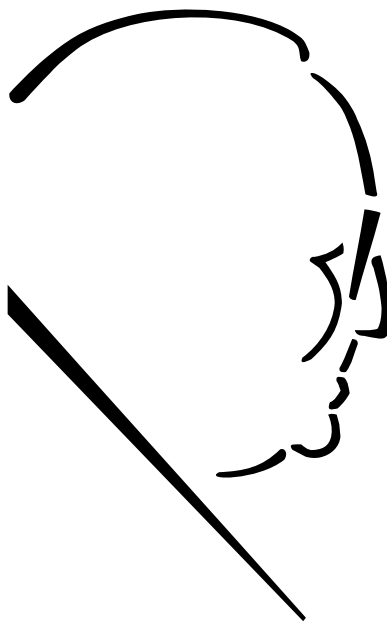
California Rising: The Life and Times of Pat Brown

The California Agenda

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The spring of 2005 has been a time in which Pat Brown is back in the news. In part, this has been a mere function of the calendar: April 21 was the centennial of his birth. But there is also a renewed interest in Pat's era and career because political issues are once again at the forefront of California's collective psyche. The state is governed, of course, by an international celebrity, and wherever Arnold Schwarzenegger turns, attention follows. After a run of far less magnetic personalities in the governor's office, Schwarzenegger seems to many people to offer a chance for a fresh assault on the state's problems, and thus many minds have refocused on the last governor perceived as one of California's great political leaders: Pat Brown.

There's not much doubt the two men would like one another personally, both being blessed with endless affability and an abundant affection for a good cigar. But politically, they are vastly different creatures, possessed of starkly different philosophical touchstones and operating in starkly different political environments. And therein lies the underlying problem with much of the nostalgia that hovers around Pat Brown's reputation. As he has become an icon of the state's politics, he has been stripped not only of his humanity – his foibles and weaknesses and mistakes – but also of his basic political philosophy. People forget that the success of his governorship rested on a vigorous, muscular liberalism that believed proudly in the power of government to help solve problems, ideas that are rarely articulated today.

Ironically, it was Brown's iconic status that first attracted me to his story. Covering the 1998 governor's race as a newspaper reporter, I noticed that the candidates frequently cited Brown as the model of the governor they wished to be. Curious about this transformation – in 30 years his reputation had changed from a bumbler booted out of office in a landslide to one of the state's political giants – I began the research that has now led to the publication of *California Rising: The Life and Times of Pat Brown*. During that lengthy examination of Brown's life and career, I became convinced that if we are to understand Brown's achievements and how we might replicate them, we must understand how the political climate has changed in the intervening decades. And to do that, we must first understand an extraordinary historical drama that marked Brown's era, an interconnected sequence of three events that altered the way Americans think of California and led directly to the political climate we experience today.

The first of these three episodes was the postwar growth and optimism for which the Brown era in California is now chiefly remembered. In the wake of World War II, America as a whole was a growing and optimistic country, yet nowhere was that sense more palpable than in California. When Brown was elected governor, the state's population was growing by 500,000 a year, or one new resident a minute. California was about to surpass New York to become the most populous state in the nation, a moment of great symbolic importance: the triumph of the age-old American migration to the West. There was an extraordinary sense that California offered the best of the good life, that people moving to the Golden State from the Midwest or the East were escaping a frozen rustbelt for a land of endless sunshine. One transplanted Chicago man said that in California he and his family "just get more sheer pleasure out of being alive." At times, the celebrations could verge on the

absurd. James Michener once argued that westerners not only were more open-minded than easterners – they “had a rough and ready acceptance of new ideas” – but were also taller, almost literally the giants of the old myths about California.

Brown never argued that the residents of his state enjoyed some outsized physicality, but he loved the sense that he ruled over a place that was the new embodiment of the American Dream. Jumping the gun, he declared a state holiday to celebrate numerical supremacy even before demographers agreed that California had finally passed New York. Far more important, he used his time as governor to enact a series of public policy initiatives that equipped California both for the growth that was already occurring and that which was sure to follow. Some of these initiatives are the trademark achievements for which Brown is now remembered: the State Water Project or the Master Plan for Higher Education, for example. But others are more obscure. To name but a few: tougher laws against racial discrimination in employment and housing, better unemployment benefits, air quality standards, tougher consumer protections, and increased aid to public schools. To pay for it all, Brown proposed and enacted a massive tax increase, including a progressive increase in income tax rates for the affluent and an increase in corporate tax rates. Far from debilitating the economy, this set of policies resulted in an extraordinary burst of public energy, investment and accomplishment. In the eight years Pat was governor, for example, the state built three University of California campuses from scratch; it has been 40 years since he left the governor’s office, and we are only now building one more. Such glittering public achievements – the campuses, the well-funded schools, the social safety-net programs, the freeways and water projects – led directly to the sense of California’s unique status. In a nation certain that it offered a better life than could be lived anywhere else in the world, California seemed to offer a better life than could be lived anywhere else in the country.

The second great characteristic of American life typified by the California experience of Brown’s era was Sixties Rebellion. To a surprising degree, the Sixties – not the chronological decade but the mood of turmoil and dissension – began in California. Two events are particularly striking: the Free Speech Movement and the Watts Riot. In the fall of 1964, students at the University of California’s flagship Berkeley campus began protesting against a ban on political speech on university-owned land. The protests grew increasingly confrontational until early December, when hundreds of demonstrators marched into Sproul Hall, the university’s main administration building, and staged a sit-in. More than 800 were arrested, but in short order the Board of Regents effectively capitulated to the students’ demands and allowed political speech on campus. A few months later in Los Angeles, police arrested a young man for drunken driving in the largely African-American section of Watts. A scuffle ensued, which soon ignited lingering tension between local residents and the police, who were widely regarded in Watts as being racist and needlessly violent. The dispute erupted into a full-blown riot that was eventually quelled by the National Guard, but only after 34 people were killed, more than 1,000 were injured and almost 4,000 were arrested.

As governor, Brown was critical to both stories, although not in ways he might have preferred. At the critical juncture of the Free Speech Movement – the night of the culminating sit-in – Brown was in Los Angeles attending a hospital fundraiser. The commander of

the California Highway Patrol officers who were at the campus phoned Brown to ask for permission to arrest the protesters. Brown approved the request, saying later that he felt he had no choice but to allow a police officer to enforce the law. Within hours, he announced that the decision was his, thus making himself the public face of the crackdown by authority. Amazingly, he was also absent when the Watts Riot began, this time in Greece. Alerted by phone, he rushed back to the state as fast as possible, and again became the public face of the crisis. The National Guard was already patrolling the streets by the time he returned, but Brown toured the afflicted area and appointed a commission to examine the causes of the crisis. As with the Free Speech Movement, he became the visible sign of authority, but in both events he also took on an unflattering reputation in the minds of many voters: he was the governor who had “allowed” a great campus to be captured by a mob and a great city to be devastated by hooligans.

In each of these cases, the mood that began in California was exported to the rest of the country. Though it drew energy and inspiration from the Civil Rights Movement, the Free Speech Movement produced a more generalized sense of youth rebellion – precisely the mood with which we now associated the Sixties. Similarly, Watts created a sense of urban rebellion against a system of authority and law enforcement often perceived as racist and repressive. The Free Speech Movement became the model for other youth protests in the years that followed; Watts in many ways presaged the riots in Detroit and Newark two years later. California had exported the Sixties to the rest of America.

The third great historical phenomenon of the Brown era was directly related to such turmoil; it was the conservative backlash that followed almost immediately. Only weeks after the Watts Riot, Ronald Reagan announced his candidacy for governor, declaring that California’s city streets had become “jungle paths” after dark, an obvious reference to Watts that no one could possibly misconstrue. During his campaign, Reagan began to promise that he would “clean up the mess at Berkeley,” an obvious reference to the Free Speech Movement. In both cases, Brown was the political target, and in both cases, the attacks succeeded hugely.

Through his constant references to the social turmoil of the state, Reagan began to reach a segment of the electorate that had been staunchly Democratic for decades: blue-collar union workers. Such voters were a critical component of the New Deal coalition, and had backed Brown overwhelmingly. But many were moderate-to-conservative on law-and-order issues, and the turmoil of the Sixties bothered them immensely. Using census data, I identified a dozen California cities with particularly high rates of industrial employment, mostly suburbs around Los Angeles filled with aerospace workers. In 1962, against Richard Nixon, Brown carried all 12 of those cities. In 1966, against Ronald Reagan, he carried only one. As a candidate for governor, in other words, Reagan identified the cohort of potential defectors from the Democratic Party that would one day make him president.

So three great waves of American historical experience – postwar optimism, Sixties rebellion, and conservative backlash – typified California in the Brown years, and as a result Americans began to think differently about their largest and most dynamic state. California

ceased to be an exception to the American experience – an idea that had held sway in the century after the Gold Rush – and instead became its leading edge.

The most recent of these events – the conservative backlash of which Brown was in many ways the first victim – remains the most important, for it altered our politics not merely tactically, by destroying the New Deal coalition, but also philosophically, by ushering in a newfound hostility to government. To my mind, the greatest change between Brown’s era and our own is this rightward shift in the American political spectrum on bedrock economic issues. Brown said of himself, “I’m a big government man,” a reflection of his belief that government often played a constructive role in helping to solve society’s problems. For him, that was a core conviction born of personal experience. He started out life as a Republican, not so much from settled dogma as because, strange though it seems today, almost everyone in San Francisco in the 1920s was a Republican. But Brown was won over to the Democratic Party by Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal. The poverty and disaffection of the Great Depression were visible around him, and he was deeply moved that FDR sought to use the power of the federal government to help individual Americans. That belief in the ability of government never left him.

Yet today California and the nation are beset with a starkly different political climate, a politics far more redolent of Ronald Reagan’s statement that government is the problem rather than the solution. Some conservatives go much farther and allege that government is a beast that must be starved, an idea Pat Brown would never have conceived. Let me offer this comparison to illustrate the changes in the political climate. Pat Brown came into office facing a deficit, and raised taxes to help fund important state programs. Ronald Reagan faced a substantially similar situation, and did essentially the same thing. So did Pete Wilson, although he was in many respects forced into a tax increase by the Legislature. Yet in today’s political climate, Arnold Schwarzenegger has thus far adamantly refused to raise taxes, even at the cost of suspending the funding guarantee for public schools. Nor, as happened in Wilson’s day, has anyone forced the governor into a more moderate position on this basic economic issue. It is inconceivable to me that faced with a choice between raising taxes and cutting important programs, Pat Brown would have chosen the latter.

That comparison of California governors reveals the largely unnoticed truth about Brown’s legacy. Discussions of his iconic status in California history are too rarely accompanied by a full understanding of how he achieved his record. Pat Brown’s time in office was a success not because he was a saint or a genius – for he was not – nor because the politics of his day was endlessly pure and honest – for it was not – but because he pursued a set of policies that improved the lives of average Californians. He believed that government could do good things, that it was a useful agent of change, that it offered a way to solve the problems facing the state. If we are to enjoy another era like his, we must move back toward that political philosophy, back toward an embrace of public enterprise and investment. In doing so, if we are both dedicated and lucky, we might once again experience a California like the one that Pat Brown built.