

## The moviegoing voter

Millions chose Arnold Schwarzenegger in the hopes of finding a happy ending for California's woes. But I won't be sleeping any better.

By Cary Tennis

Californians, robbed by Enron, rebuked by Bush, rocked by downturn and now filled with passionate confusion between the needs of their state and the needs of their psyches, have elected as governor not a man but a symbol, a symbol of strength perfected by the will into a kind of triumphal capitalist beauty.

Beauty? Arnold? It's a syllogism, silly: Strength is beautiful; the beautiful is true; and truth, as any child who knows the story of George Washington and the apple tree can tell you, is what America is all about. Thus, Arnold Schwarzenegger, native of Graz, Austria, equals beauty equals truth equals America. Welcome to California.

I have been thinking for some time now about the appeal of Arnold Schwarzenegger as the appeal of an avenging hero from a foreign land who rescues us from our indolence and despair. I have been thinking about the visceral appeal of a terminator, the man of violence and certainty who will end things as they are and bring about a new world that looks as fresh and bright as the world of childhood. I have been thinking about Schwarzenegger as a man with the appeal of a violent Christ into whom all our sins of weakness and equivocation are poured in the form of punch cards: A Christ with special sticker options, a v8 Christ, a Hummer Christ who does not turn the other cheek but fires his weapon with the vehemence of Jehovah and the casual coolness of a gangster, who slaps around the whimpering, duplicitous and heartless—*actionless!*—gray father Davis who has unforgivably let the roof collapse on California, who has let Easterners and Southerners trick us and take our stuff, who in his pasty, wimpish impotence has failed to register even one pure, simple, masculine note of outrage at what he has allowed to happen, whose gestures are as cold and empty as the gestures of a department store mannequin, whose face is as unmarred as the face of a virgin, whose tactics seem the tactics not of a lion but of a lowly, cunning reptile, a snake or poisonous insect.

And so I understand why an aggrieved people might call upon Arnie to exact revenge on Gray Davis for his sins of omission. Still, it's so nutty, there must be more to it—not simply the reasons the pollsters tell us but the reasons Lear's fool might tell us, the reasons a soothsayer might conjure, or, for that matter, maybe the reasons I, as an advice columnist, might tell a letter writer who is pained, as I am, by this outcome. So I tell a bedtime story to make it all make sense: I tell myself that we have simply confused the needs of our psyches with the needs of our state. But it makes going to sleep at night no better, because I'm afraid I'll be drifting off to sleep like I was last week and I'll see Arnie on the television again, looking like a hood, a strongman, a fascist ruler, commanding me to give him my vote in a voice that sounds like, "Give me your wallet." I thought to myself, He is not asking. He is demanding. We must be in trouble. I'd better start doing push-ups. In the same way that I understand how Californians are exacting revenge because of things that they think were done to them, I understand how the mugger who takes my wallet was formed by social forces. Understanding doesn't get me my wallet back. Nor does it get me my state back.

What I'm saying is: It's not the wish for such a figure that is surprising or frightening. Dark wishes are food for creation; anyone who makes art traffics in darkness like stock-brokers traffic in dollars. Blood keeps us alive; darkness lets us sleep. I've got no problem with my murderous wishes and my dark, confounding desires. It's just that I think the place for our craziness is in the arts, books, movies, television, comedy; I think I know the difference between politics and movies, between dream and reality, and I would like to assume that the other people in California know the difference, too.

As hundreds of thousands of Californians work through their anger on the political stage like participants in a Fritz Perls encounter session, I must say, being an advice columnist, they could have just written to me. I could have told them: It's the psyche, stupid. It's not about Gray Davis, it's not about Arnold, it's about that insupportable belief in capitalism you have that things are supposed to only get perpetually better and never get worse.

It's that need you have when things get worse to find somebody to blame, or find somebody to burn, or find somebody to beat to a pulp and leave lying in an alley somewhere deep in South Central. It's that belief of yours that when things get worse it's your father's fault or your uncle's fault or the fault of the guy in front of you on the freeway. You'd think that a downturn in the economy would teach you only that downturns happen. You'd think when scoundrels loot the treasury it would teach you the world is full of scoundrels. But no, it seems like the hardest thing in the world for a person to do is just sit there and take it all in, take it like a man. Instead, he's got to go out and find somebody to take it out on. Or, as has now happened, find somebody big and strong and send him in there to take care of things.

There's always somebody out there who will promise to make it better. If they'd only written to me I would have warned them that the politics of revenge, the politics of a return to purity, the politics of religion, Maoism, totalitarianism, fascism, Nazism, terrorism, all those mass movements ride your primal needs to office and then dump you once they've gotten off, and you're left once again trying to get some clean drinking water, efficient markets, roads, bridges, telephones. I would have told them beware of politicians who promise the impossible gift of salvation, cessation of worry and despair, return to a blissful earlier time. Beware the promise of fairness and a perfect set of rules; beware the promise of a pumped-up world where everyone's bowels are regular and spiritual doubt has vanished, where the nation's clouded destiny has been clarified like ghee, where all the dashed hopes and deep wounds of our impoverished ancestors will be avenged. Beware all that. It's the empty chatter of a telemarketing script.

But that's what Arnold has been promising—not just in his political ads but in his very being and image. The election of Arnold Schwarzenegger is profoundly undemocratic not because the majority didn't win but because the majority acted as moviegoers rather than as citizens. Democracy is not simply about the vote. The vote is not simply like a ticket bought at Disneyland. And citizenship is not about the satisfaction of the id.

I think that the kind of passion now being poured into politics is the kind of passion that belongs in the bedroom, in novels and movies, on television and in sports. It is the passion of fucking and getting fucked, of beating and being beaten, of tricking and shooting and winning. It is not the passion of governing, which is the slow, simmering passion of long-held beliefs. Citizenship in a democracy is about the difficult and messy division of resources, about the tedious maintenance of infrastructure, about the orderly administration of tragic justice, about incremental improvements in the protection of the poor and the weak. It is not about dreams instantly fulfilled, as they are in the movies. It is about dreams desperately held to throughout decades of slow progress.

The complex duties of citizenship also require the kind of education that allows one to distinguish between policy and entertainment. Would it be unsurprising only to conspiracy theorists if the decline of California's schools were a welcome development to those who would gladly see the masses fighting a savage tribal war of social Darwinism?

If the people of California had simply written to me and asked me, I would have told them all this and more, in simple language they can easily understand.

But no. They had to go elect the Terminator.

I distrust large political promises. I fear that if we cannot solve our personal problems we are likely to sublimate them into political ideas of vengeance and control, of conquering and domination. So in my column I stick to the day-to-day details. I say,

Here is what we do today to fight fascism. We go to the post office and mail off our fliers. Here is what we do to fight racism. We tithe. We hire by skill and ability. We see a person who looks different from us and if any of the despised words we have heard as children come into our minds we replace them with: Citizen. American. Brother. Neighbor. Californian. We try to do the simple things, the one-on-one things. And if someone promises to eradicate racism and end poverty and stop war if only we elect him and give him the power to do so, we laugh and move on.

What disturbs me, again, is the confusion of the political with the psychological. I am a nervous guy. There are those who trust in the enduring strength of world markets, democracy and capitalism to ensure world stability. Me, I go through most days figuring we're only a couple of steps away from appalling savagery and madness. And if you think about how we could get there from here, at first it doesn't look easy. Perhaps I'm just unstable, or had too uncertain a childhood, but I worry about things like this. I worry about things that have happened in the past, like what happened in Germany. I worry about the unexpected, the things we can't imagine happening. I worry about things like 9/11, which proved to all of us worriers that really bad things really can happen.

So what bothers me about the recall vote and the ascent of Arnold Schwarzenegger is that if anyone were to devise a route out of democracy and into a tribal, vengeful savagery, this melding of the world of entertainment, which satiates our most primal wishes, and the world of politics, which is supposed to moderate and rationalize our worst wishes and sublimate our ideals, looks like a pretty good route. Movies are the great persuaders. Their power is much greater than the power of reason, and that is what bothers me. The passion of politics must be tempered by reason. How much difference is there between electing a savage action hero and electing a Mussolini? I don't think Arnold is a fascist. But it is the worship of strength and charisma themselves that I find alarming in a democratic system. I think once the electorate acts from its own troubled id, we are vulnerable to the election of untold numbers of scoundrels, one of whom or a series of whom, could spell the end of democracy.

So hasta la vista, baby. Alabama looks pretty good right now.

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