

UC Berkeley

California Journal of Politics and Policy

Title

Total Recall: My Unbelievably True Life Story

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9nz678jb>

Journal

California Journal of Politics and Policy, 5(1)

Author

Block, A.G.

Publication Date

2013-01-12

DOI

10.5070/P2V59X

Peer reviewed

A.G. Block

Total Recall: My Unbelievably True Life Story

By Arnold Schwarzenegger

Simon & Schuster 2012

646 pages

I recently spent a fantastic week in the company of Arnold Schwarzenegger, a former tank driver in the Austrian Army. Schwarzenegger, who some time ago moved from the Alps to Brentwood, published an “unbelievably true life story” this fall, and it was my privilege to worry through it on behalf of this publication.

Critics dismissed the book as “light.” I beg to differ. A 646-page hardback is hardly light. FedEx used a forklift to dump it on the porch, and it took a team of Clydesdales to drag it through the front door. That said, it is ironic that a celebrity whose fame grew from bulk and muscle should produce a memoir so lacking bulk and muscle. The images sprayed into it amount to autobiographical graffiti; “profound” was not a priority.

To be sure, Schwarzenegger traveled an extraordinary road, lined with multiple triumphs, any one of which might have satisfied a more modest appetite. As an athlete, he was named “Mr. Olympia” a record six times, his charisma both tonic and toxin to bodybuilding as serious competitive sport. As an actor, he became an internationally recognized action hero who created one of the most memorable characters in film history – “The Terminator.” As a businessman, he combined instinct, risk-taking, and relentless salesmanship to accumulate a financial portfolio that rivals the Nabob of Hyderabad. As a politician, he was twice elected governor of California. You do not put this assortment of trophies on your mantle unless you are smart, flexible, seriously focused, and manically driven.

So, he probably thought it natural that the only scribe capable of doing justice to the Schwarzenegger epic was – well – Schwarzenegger. As a chronicler of self, he shares his relatively simple formula for success: Choose a goal, work your fanny off, and allow nothing to sidetrack you. Throughout the book, he exposes the circuits and wiring of moviemaking, bodybuilding, and business investing, describing in chapter after chapter how each of his careers evolved and revealing the genius that led to his success. He revels in the details of each ascent to the mountaintop, even digressing at one point to describe how to roll a fine Cuban cigar.

There is one lapse in his attention to detail: He provides little insight about his career as a politician. Here, as other reviewers have noted, he breezes along the surface of his term as “The Governor,” offering nothing of value at precisely the point when he might help us appreciate how government works and why it sometimes fails. As a result, he squanders a chance to serve the broader public interest, and the monument he chisels to himself is not flattering.

Start with people – you know, the rest of humanity. For Schwarzenegger, they seem to fall into three categories: goals, assets, and props. Sometimes, a person is all three at once; most notably, his wife, Maria Shriver. He can be generous in praise of those who helped him along the way but ruthlessly pragmatic. Soon after “Conan the Barbarian” made him a star, he dumped his agent, Larry Kubik, because he was not “big enough.”

In the end, the adjectives that sketch his personality and approach to life are “self-absorbed,” “rash,” “reactive,” “cunning,” “secretive,” “deceitful,” “cowardly,” “indifferent,” and “reckless.” On the other hand, he can be generous, hardworking, fun-loving, enthusiastic, curious, self-deprecating, optimistic, confident, and willing to honor business commitments if not personal ones. It is, he concedes, a complex stew.

A jumble of contradictions, Schwarzenegger’s behavior is consistent on one point: He is dependably thoughtless when it comes to people. He is impulsive, careening from “oops” to “oops” as though life is a game of bumper cars. The consequences are fraught with collateral damage and, throughout the book, he applies the phrase “in hindsight” like an herbalist might smear aloe on an owie. Supreme among the carnage is the wreckage of his marriage to Shriver, to which he devotes the penultimate chapter, “The Secret.” That oft-reported misfortune need not be related here.

Focus, instead, on another episode that underscores his relentless “it’s about me” mind-set: the 1980 Mr. Olympia contest in Sydney, Australia. At the time, he had retired from the sport to devote himself to movies, but a pre-production delay for “Conan” gave him the chance to vie for his sixth title. To prepare himself, he accelerated his training regimen under the noses of other competitors, deceiving them with the ruse that he was staying in shape for “Conan.” When he arrived in Sydney, it was under the guise that he had been hired as a commentator for CBS Sports. Instead, he ripped off his blazer and jumped into the fray, pressuring officials to bend the rules to allow him to compete and infuriating other contenders – many of whom were longtime friends. He won the title but at a price. “In hindsight,” he confesses, his ego-driven quest nearly destroyed competitive bodybuilding. A few friends did not speak to him for years.

Schwarzenegger enjoyed remarkable success in nearly every arena he sought to master, and it is no surprise that the exception is politics and public affairs.

In politics, fame is not a cudgel to get your way; impulsive behavior is a liability, not an asset. Bodybuilding, movies, even real estate ventures are escapades that bring personal gratification, fame, and/or wealth. Politics is a team sport, and, based on the thin gruel in this book, Schwarzenegger is not wired to be a team player.

Schwarzenegger's growing interest in politics was motivated, he writes, by living the American dream as an immigrant in the late 1960s and his professed frustration with government's inability to solve persistent problems. Because he thinks of himself as the take-charge action hero, what better way to fix politics than to take charge? A well-placed blast from a flamethrower can make even the most pigheaded foe pliable.

Schwarzenegger's entry into politics was made easier by fame, novelty, romance, and wealth from business ventures. They allowed elbow-rubbing with, among others, Milton Friedman, Ronald Reagan, and George H.W. Bush. A capitalist, entrepreneur, and investor, he naturally gravitated to the Republican Party, even though he found himself at odds with significant chunks of its agenda (environment, tolerance for gays, immigration, abortion). His ambitions were fueled and encouraged by his wife's decidedly Democratic family, especially Eunice and Sargent Shriver and Ted Kennedy who embodied the principle of giving back through public service.

The future governor's route to Sacramento began in Washington, DC, where Bush One named him "fitness czar," providing a national platform and invitations to Camp David. The leap from appointee to politician burst fully formed in his mind, like Venus on the half-shell. Nor was he modest about his ambitions. No Clint Eastwood elected mayor of tiny Carmel, Schwarzenegger shot for the top: governor of California, and toyed with the notion of running in 2002 – plans derailed by a commitment to "Terminator 3." Instead in 2002, he dipped a toe into the political cauldron with a statewide initiative, Proposition 49. The measure funded after-school programs and was the kind of ballot-box budgeting that would haunt him as governor. Organizing the Prop 49 effort put him in touch with political pros associated with former Governor Pete Wilson, and they tutored him in statewide campaigns. When Prop 49 passed, he took home a goody bag stuffed with political dreams.

The ideal opportunity to run for governor hove into view much sooner than Schwarzenegger anticipated and in a way that avoided the rat's nest of a Republican primary – which he may not have won given his less-than-gospel outlook on social issues. His break was the 2003 recall of Democratic Governor Gray Davis. Schwarzenegger grabbed the ring over the heated objections of his wife. Eventually, Maria came around, although Schwarzenegger does not say why she gave in, other than that her mother told her not to hold him back. Apparently,

that was enough for Maria, who remained conflicted about his candidacy. Her inner turmoil ran deep, and while Schwarzenegger acknowledged it, he was too enchanted with the notion to bow out.

Once he entered the race – famously, on the “Jay Leno Show” – two inevitable conclusions emerged from the chaos of the campaign: Davis was going down and Schwarzenegger would succeed him.

So, Schwarzenegger added governor of California to his list of accomplishments. And here, the book fades as a useful narrative, mostly because the author no longer offers much substance and raises the suspicion that as governor he was the center of attention but not always the center of action. Three notable examples: workers’ compensation reform of 2004, the 2005 special election, and negotiations over the 2009–2010 state budget. In each case, Schwarzenegger and the Democratic-controlled Legislature butted heads, but the book only casts light on workers’ comp.

Schwarzenegger came into office with heavy backing from the business community, especially the California Chamber of Commerce, and he wielded their support like a nightstick when tackling workers’ compensation reform in 2004. According to Schwarzenegger, he had his business buddies draft an initiative to overhaul the workers’ comp system, and then used the threat of that initiative to bully Democrats into negotiating reform more or less on his terms. When discussions bogged down, he traversed California using his fame to sell the initiative as though it was the next “Terminator” movie.

The threat of an initiative was nothing new in California politics, but this time the guy wielding the club was not a typical politician but a hugely popular, enormously energetic novelty act. The ploy softened up Democrats who preferred a negotiated deal with the governor to an initiative crammed down their throats by the business community.

Once the compromise was done, the initiative itself was abandoned, although the threat of an initiative became a weapon firmly embedded in Schwarzenegger’s political arsenal. With the recall and workers’ comp in his trophy case, Schwarzenegger’s approval ratings soared. So, too, did his hubris.

In politics, the fusion of popularity and undisciplined self-esteem is a formula for disaster, and so it was with “Ahnold.” The trip wire was the 2004 budget with its multibillion gap between revenue and expenditures. Schwarzenegger wanted to seal that gap by imposing permanent spending cuts rather than raising taxes, but legislative Democrats fought to protect programs that served their constituencies, notably unions and the poor. In the ensuing melee, the governor’s swagger increased and his criticism of lawmakers intensified. In a TV interview, he complained that Democrats were too much in the thrall of greedy special interests. Warming to his subject, he called them “girlie men.”

“In hindsight,” he regretted the remark, admitting that “it was stupid to antagonize the legislators.” But battle lines were gouged in the sand. Emboldened by his success over workers’ comp, Schwarzenegger rolled the initiative dice again in 2005 in an effort to impose his will with a variety of reforms. Democrats stiffened, forcing Schwarzenegger to carry through with his threat. He and his business allies put five initiatives before voters in a special election he called for November 2005. In the process, he took on – “enraged” would be more accurate – some of the most powerful interests in Sacramento: teachers, nurses, firefighters, and public employee unions.

Still, Schwarzenegger writes, he tried hard to avoid a ballot confrontation, working “behind the scenes” with Democratic Assembly Speaker Fabian Núñez to hammer out a deal that might avoid a special election. The negotiations, he insists, almost succeeded, but he and Núñez ran out of time. In this case, “time” meant the deadline for placing initiatives on the ballot.

“Fabian and I were close to a deal,” he writes. “But two things stood in the way.” One of those “things” – labor – was reluctant, “even though I was willing to meet them more than halfway.” The other “thing” was his staff, which did not trust labor.

This should be the place to start – not finish – writing about the special election. What does Schwarzenegger mean by “more than halfway?” How close did he and Núñez get to a compromise, and what was each side giving up? What advice was he given, and by whom? Did a voice of sanity cry from inside his circle of close advisors? He expresses surprise that opponents – whose political power he sought to cripple – spent \$150 million to defeat all five initiatives. Why was he surprised?

Schwarzenegger leaves us groping for answers because at this point the book shrivels to a frail skeleton, insight having withered away. This is especially significant because every one of his initiatives lost at the polls, shredding his political stature. Although humbled, he managed to rebuild enough political cache to be reelected in 2006, but his reputation – and clout – never recovered.

The same lack of insight “informs” passages devoted to the 2009–2010 budget. The ultimate result of this quarrel was a compromise acceptable to no one. Yet, he writes: “The financial crisis made necessary the biggest and most difficult deal of my political career. After months of grueling negotiations, late one night in February 2009, we finally agreed on a budget.” Both Republicans and Democrats had to make concessions – welfare reform, union furloughs, tax increases: “I coaxed legislative leaders of both parties to go along with me, and they all paid a price.”

That is it. At this point, readers know more about rolling Cuban cigars than about a significant chapter in California history. This is a shame because

Schwarzenegger could guide us through this difficult confrontation. Instead, he wastes an opportunity to be more revealing. Where did legislative Republicans and Democrats begin these negotiations? How did they inch toward a compromise, and what was his role in that process? He “coaxed ... leaders.” How did that work?

The political careers of Republican leaders Dave Cogdill (Senate) and Mike Villines (Assembly) were on the line. After the deal was announced, both were ousted by ideological grumps in their respective caucuses. Schwarzenegger brings this up but offers no specifics about the “coaxing” that persuaded Cogdill and Villines to fall on their swords. He does not even mention that their courage earned the two Republicans (along with their Democratic counterparts, Darrell Steinberg and Karen Bass) the 2010 “Profile in Courage” Award from the John F. Kennedy Library. (Conspicuously, Schwarzenegger did not share the award.)

As governor, Schwarzenegger was full of big ideas, big reforms. During the recall, he campaigned on the notion of “blowing up boxes” in Sacramento, of ending business as usual, and in one paragraph toward the end, he summarizes his big ideas – climate change, budget and tax reform, pension reform, workers’ comp reform, health care reform – but he does not define them or explain how to bring them to life. It is as though the mere mention of climate change lends gravitas to his legacy, like his friendship with Mikhail Gorbachev.

Skilled public servants master nuance. Yet when he writes about politics, Schwarzenegger ignores the “small” maneuvers that often nudge a negotiation in a particular direction. The Kennedys understood this level of politics, especially his beloved Teddy. So, too, did his political mentor, Pete Wilson. Just after the recall, Schwarzenegger seemed to understand – visiting lawmakers’ offices rather than summoning them to his lair. Eventually, however, he seemed smitten with flamboyance, as though politics provided yet another stage on which to preen and pose.

Of course, not every minor gesture works to your advantage. One act that stained his reputation was commuting a prison sentence for the son of his political ally Fabian Núñez. Esteban Núñez had been convicted as an accomplice in the stabbing death of a San Diego college student and given 16 years in state prison. The day before he left office, Schwarzenegger reduced the sentence to 7 years. Unfortunately, he failed to inform prosecutors or the victim’s family. The governor was universally flogged over this “gesture,” but the book does not mention it. Despite its significance, the commutation does not rise to the level where, “in hindsight,” he might explain it.

Schwarzenegger gives kudos to many people across his varied activities, but there are a few glaring Capitol-related oversights:

- John Burton, Democratic leader of the state Senate and the most powerful legislator in California during Schwarzenegger's first tenuous months in office, is mentioned only in passing. Without Burton's early help, Schwarzenegger would have foundered early on.
- Mike Genest, director of the Department of Finance for most of Schwarzenegger's tenure, does not even rate a footnote. Genest, a nuts-and-bolts guy, was the governor's point person on the budget.
- Alan Zaremberg, president of the California Chamber of Commerce and one of the most influential voices in the early days of Schwarzenegger's administration, is not mentioned.

The Schwarzenegger epic is not over. He has returned to movies, beating to a pulp a new generation of punks and poltroons. He established the Schwarzenegger Institute for State and Global Policy at the University of Southern California, another big idea with a big agenda, offering him a voice on the international stage. His challenge remains to attract an audience that takes him seriously.

"Total Recall" shines a light on an extraordinary life. Admire him or not, Schwarzenegger accomplished much in his 65 years. But his memoir is like his action movies – an amusement that promotes the star and entertains in the here and now. In the broader scheme of things, it is not a serious work because it highlights frivolous aspects of Schwarzenegger's career and skims over his public service.

Perhaps it should have been called *Selective Recall: Most of My Unbelievably True Story*.

A.G. Block is associate director of the University of California Center Sacramento. From 1983 to 2005, he was an editor at California Journal magazine.

Review by A.G. Block