Editorial: This year, the state is in a much different state

In his annual speech, the governor needs to take stock and recall his previous words

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On Tuesday afternoon, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger will deliver his fifth State of the State address. For his speechwriters, this year's address will likely be their most vexing task to date.

The state's conundrums are now piled upon each other like pickup sticks: A $14 billion budget deficit; continued partisan deadlock (so much for post-partisanship); mounting vulnerability to fires, earthquakes and droughts; a prison crisis; a Delta water crisis; a housing crisis; the festering sores of failing public schools, blighted neighborhoods, street crime, poverty and homelessness.

Last year, the governor compared California with Athens. This year, a more apt analogy is Rome in its waning days of glory.

Schwarzenegger, of course, is unlikely to offer such a bleak assessment. Compared with his recent predecessors, this governor is programmed to be relentlessly upbeat.

Thus, Schwarzenegger is likely to highlight his accomplishments – including voter approval of $37 billion in infrastructure bonds and passage of a landmark bill to reduce greenhouse gases – even though those occurred in 2006. Expect him to remain optimistic about health care reform and water – the unfinished business of 2007.

Beyond that, where does this governor go? Given the ongoing writers' 1/2 strike, perhaps he should consider recycling some old lines. Below are excerpts from the governor's past State of the State speeches that should have a special resonance in 2008:

"June is the month when billions of dollars in past loans come due and the financial house of cards built over the last half decade is set to collapse. When individuals overspend themselves into trouble, financial counselors often tell them to consolidate their credit card balances so they can work their way out of trouble – and also tear up their credit cards. That is what our California Recovery Plan is all about."

– Jan. 6, 2004
"Unless we go to the root of the problem and reform the system, the budget will continue to be one big fight, year after year after year. ... We must have a new approach that overrides the formulas, overrides the special interests and overrides the forces that have turned some of you from legislators into clerks."

– Jan. 5, 2005

"Although a strong economy has produced billions of dollars in unexpected revenues, we still face a structural deficit that will soon resurface. We cannot make the mistakes of the past. So this year must continue to be the year of reform."

– Jan. 5, 2006

"Tomorrow, I will outline my budget, which is balanced. ... We have made this great progress without raising taxes. We have reduced the deficit, not by burdening the people and our businesses, but by encouraging economic growth. ... The state of our state is strong."

– Jan. 9, 2007

Now California has come full circle. The deficit is close to the $16 billion Schwarzenegger inherited in 2003. He and lawmakers haven’t adopted basic reforms.

Subprime mortgages have caused the house of cards to collapse. It’s time for the governor to voice a little humility, and a renewed commitment toward solving the serious problems of this ever-growing state.