Dan Walters: Governor's milestone oozes irony

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By ironic happenstance, the fourth anniversary of Arnold Schwarzenegger's governorship Saturday followed by just a few days the official confirmation that the issue that got him elected in a historic recall election – the state's chronic budget crisis – is as bad as ever.

The Legislature's budget analyst revealed that the 2007-08 budget Schwarzenegger had signed just three months ago while crowing that it was balanced, is already nearly $6 billion out of whack, consuming all of the state's $4.1 billion reserve and then some. He and legislators face another $8 billion gap next year.

Worse yet, the report demonstrated that the chronic deficit can be, in a sense, laid at Schwarzenegger's feet. Were it not for two of Schwarzenegger's earliest acts as governor four years ago – reinstating a multibillion-dollar cut in taxes on cars and borrowing about $11 billion to cover one year's operating deficits – the budget would be, in fact, balanced. Servicing that debt and compensating local governments for the revenues lost from the car tax cut add up to more than the ongoing gap between income and outgo.

Schwarzenegger's failure to resolve the budget crisis is clearly the biggest blemish on the record of his unique, up-and-down governorship. It is also emblematic of the overall tenor of his tenure, which has been one of grandiose, often unrealistic, promises and proposals but precious little lasting accomplishment.

Schwarzenegger, wildly successful in previous careers as a bodybuilder and movie star, wants to govern effectively, so he deserves credit for attitude, but his naiveté and hubris have been deadly. Clearly, he didn't really know how the Capitol operates before he swept into town, and that ignorance led to a series of errors that crippled, perhaps fatally, his chances of becoming the historic figure he wants to be.

Predecessor Gray Davis, having spent decades in the Capitol, understood that California verges on being ungovernable because of its cultural, economic and geographic complexity – that it's extremely difficult, if not impossible, to achieve the consensus that movement on any major issue demands.

Accordingly, Davis didn't really try to govern. He was content to play off the interest groups and become involved only if those interests achieved agreement among themselves. Ironically, however, he found that risk aversion was very risky when confronted with two crises, energy and the budget, that he could not avoid.
Schwarzenegger believed, quite sincerely, that he could apply his larger-than-life presence and celebrity to the Capitol and succeed where Davis had failed. But his fundamental premise – that the Capitol is a collection of people – was flawed. It was and is a collection of interests that are immune to personal persuasion.

That said, Schwarzenegger did have a brief opening, very early in his governorship, when he might have taken command – as illustrated by his most notable success, cajoling the Legislature into overhauling the much-troubled workers' compensation system.

The moment dissipated, however, once the Capitol learned that Schwarzenegger was somewhat afraid of direct confrontation, especially on the budget. And months later, when he tried to recapture his momentum through a package of "year of reform" ballot measures, he failed miserably, thanks to his own inept campaign and a brutal, union-financed opposition drive.

Ever since his ballot measure failure two years ago, Schwarzenegger has shied away from challenging the Capitol and its ways, largely content to take whatever a liberal Legislature has been willing to give him.

He has become, in effect, a co-dependent in a dysfunctional political family, as his complicit role in the state's ongoing budget crisis underscores.