The worst budget mess ever: The governor and lawmakers collide when they should be collaborating.

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Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's budget proposal was depressing by itself. And the reaction to it made the Capitol even gloomier.

Blame the governor for his populist pouncing on the federal government, trying to lay partial responsibility for Sacramento's dogged deficit on Washington.

Cite Democrats and their interest groups for too many predictable, pedestrian potshots.

And, while we're at it, fault Republicans for their obstinate opposition to even considering a temporary tax increase.

OK, there's merit on all sides. Everyone's got a legitimate beef. And this is an election year in California, when politics is particularly poisonous.

It doesn't help everyone's mood that the Capitol has been socked in by dreary tule fog. It was drizzling outside Friday as the governor was unveiling his budget with its painful program cuts that even he called draconian.

But all the bromides and sound bites -- whether meritorious or just mischievous -- will make it harder for the politicians to resolve arguably the worst budget mess ever.

The answer to Rodney King's famous question -- "Can't we all just get along?" -- is "Rarely" in politics. But this is one time when the politicians urgently need to search for common ground to build bridges.

Perhaps wishing for that level of pragmatism is Pollyannaish. And, after all, this is merely the opening curtain on what Schwarzenegger has always called "the kabuki . . . this whole song and dance" of budget negotiating.

In Japan, the traditional kabuki drama is revered. Sacramento's version is reviled, based on polling of voters. And I'm sounding a loud catcall for the entire cast.

Schwarzenegger struck a Democratic nerve -- in Washington and Sacramento -- by declaring in his otherwise upbeat State of the State speech and later in the bleak budget roll-out that the federal government is partly to blame for California's red ink. He stepped up the attack during an appearance on NBC's "Meet the Press" Sunday, targeting the California congressional
delegation.

He isn't asking for "a federal bailout, just federal fairness," the governor asserts.

Democrats especially smarted when he declared that "Congress is about to pile billions more [state costs] onto California with the new healthcare bill" -- this from a governor who three years ago tried to push his own multibillion-dollar healthcare proposal through the Legislature.

You may recall that when Schwarzenegger was first elected, the Hollywood action hero proclaimed himself "the collectinator" who would seize California's fair share from Washington. By his own measure, he has failed.

In truth, the governor has some valid points about Washington shortchanging California.

One example: The federal government has failed to protect the border but has stuck the states with paying for most of the costs of incarcerating illegal immigrant felons. Schwarzenegger is demanding -- as many other California governors have, futilely -- that the feds pay all the cost. He's seeking $880 million and already is counting it in his budget.

But Schwarzenegger the governor -- unlike Schwarzenegger the candidate or actor -- never does particularly well on the attack. Governing requires collaboration, including with California's two Democratic U.S. senators, if one expects help from Washington.

"California's budget crisis was created in Sacramento, not Washington," Sen. Dianne Feinstein shot back. "These problems are not going away until there is wholesale reform of the state's budget process. . . . Pointing fingers is not constructive."

Sen. Barbara Boxer called a teleconference with reporters to rebut Schwarzenegger's assertion that California gets back only 78 cents for every dollar it sends Washington in taxes. That figure is several years old, she contended; Washington currently sends back $1.45.

She accused the governor of "threatening people" with his "trigger" plan.

That's his plan to shoot the wounded unless the feds pony up $6.9 billion he figures is rightfully California's. He already has tallied that sum in his proposed $83-billion "balanced" general fund budget for the fiscal year starting July 1.

If the federal money doesn't come through, Schwarzenegger will pull the trigger and fire to kill. He'll aim to eliminate the state's welfare program, CalWorks. Ditto the Healthy Families healthcare program for poor kids. He'd also wipe out In-Home Supportive services for the elderly and disabled. Even if the Washington money does arrive, he'll try to cripple home care services.

Without federal funds, the governor would cut state employees' salaries by an additional 5% -- on top of 10% he'd take in any case from their checks (5% pay, 5% pension contribution) and whittle the workforce by 5%. 
To be fair, the state is staring into a $20-billion hole over the next 18 months and Schwarzenegger has little choice. Unless he's willing to significantly raise taxes -- and so far he refuses -- his budget must be built on phantom funds and severed bones.

"You've got to be kidding," Senate leader Darrell Steinberg (D-Sacramento) told reporters. He asked, who's the governor fighting for? "Certainly not the people who have already made great sacrifices."

"The governor's budget will have a body count," declared Assembly Budget Committee Chairwoman Noreen Evans (D-Santa Rosa). "The Legislature's reaction . . . will mean the difference between life or death for our seniors, working families and children."

True. But the verbal reaction to the governor's dreadful budget -- both knee-jerk and legit -- combines with his blame-shifting to further pollute the political atmosphere. It's a lousy start to the New Year.

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