

# Dan Walters: A formerly risk-averse governor cuts loose

**By Dan Walters -- Bee Columnist**

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The recall of Gray Davis, the governor who didn't want to govern, and the election of movie star Arnold Schwarzenegger as his successor were sensational, as well as historic, political events.

While it's been interesting, sometimes fascinating, to watch Schwarzenegger's on-the-job training as governor, the only thing that really counts is whether he can restore the relevance and effectiveness of California's dysfunctional government - a malady much deeper than Davis' failures.

For all his tough talk about blowing up boxes and shaking up Sacramento, Schwarzenegger was only partially effective during his first year, seemingly unwilling to risk his soaring popularity to directly confront the powerful forces of status quo.

Ultimately, however, Schwarzenegger concluded that no matter how much he schmoozed the Capitol's denizens, the underlying tangle of narrow interests and single-purpose agendas was immune to personal charm, or even to public disgust. His ambition to be as successful in politics as he had been in bodybuilding and movies was doomed unless he could alter the Capitol's culture.

The somewhat risk-averse Schwarzenegger of 2004 is giving way to the go-for-broke Schwarzenegger of 2005, advancing an array of major governmental reforms, challenging legislators to enact them - and promising to take his crusade to the voters should they balk.

Schwarzenegger called on lawmakers in his annual State of the State address Wednesday to impose limits on state spending, including the schools, overhaul the way in which legislative and congressional districts are drawn, bring merit pay to teachers, and reform an increasingly expensive public pension system - all of which would become measures placed on the ballot by initiative, probably in a special election next fall, if the Legislature rejects them. He also proposed a series of lesser reforms, including an overhaul of the state's much-troubled adult and youth prison systems, and the elimination of nearly 100 state boards and commissions.

The Republican governor told legislators "this is a time for choosing" and left no doubt that he will portray the coming battle as one between special interests and the public interest.

"I know the special interests will oppose all the reforms I've mentioned," he said, adding, "This place is in the grip of special interests (but) the people of California demand reform. This is what the recall election was all about. That is what the ballot process is all about. And that is what this special session is all about. ... If we here in this chamber don't work together to reform the government, the people will rise up and reform it themselves. And I will join them. And I will fight with them."

The changes that Schwarzenegger wants will, as he said, engender fierce opposition. The powerful California Teachers Association will oppose merit pay for teachers and the changes in the state financing law for schools that the CTA persuaded voters to pass in 1988. The even more powerful California Correctional Peace Officers Association will oppose what he wants to do in a prison system he says has "too much union control and too little management courage and accountability." They and other public employee unions will oppose pension reform. Democratic lawmakers dislike changes in legislative districts by an outside commission; many Republicans do, as well.

Groups allied with Schwarzenegger are already launching the initiative drives in anticipation that the Legislature will resist, and to underscore the seriousness of his intent. Chances are strong that the entire package will be placed in a special election next fall.

It's a huge roll of the dice for Schwarzenegger, aimed at cracking the status quo mentality of the Capitol and, if successful, laying the groundwork for an even broader array of centrist reforms and infrastructure improvement in a second Schwarzenegger term.

Were he to succeed this year, Schwarzenegger could make his mark as one of those rare governors who really makes a difference. Were he to fail, not only would his governorship become just an aberrant footnote, but California's best chance of resolving its crisis of governance would be lost.

Those are immense stakes.