

Dan Walters: Schwarzenegger may be putting himself into a political pitfall

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Published 2:15 am PST Friday, January 6, 2006

Arnold Schwarzenegger, exuding equal measures of hubris and naiveté, has repeatedly set up himself and his governorship for failure - promising more than he could deliver, reneging when promises collided with fiscal and political reality, overhyping his modest accomplishments, and confusing Californians by abruptly changing his rhetorical tone.

Having reaped what he sowed - a steep plunge in public esteem and massive rejection of his "year of reform" ballot measures - one might think that Schwarzenegger would approach the governorship more realistically. But he did it again Thursday, pinning his re-election hopes on a grandiose, \$222 billion program of public works improvements, and thus digging a pitfall that could be the final resting place of his political career.

"I have absorbed my defeat and I have learned my lesson," a chastened Schwarzenegger told state lawmakers in his annual State of the State address. "And the people, who always have the last word, sent a clear message - cut the warfare, cool the rhetoric, find common ground and fix the problems together."

Evoking politicians of the past who built California's system of public facilities and citing the state's inexorable population growth, Schwarzenegger declared that "our systems are at the breaking point now. We will need more roads, more hospitals, more schools, more nurses, more teachers, more police, more fire, more water, more energy, more ports ... more, more, more. ..."

Heaven knows that California needs massive investment to restore a deteriorating and overtaxed infrastructure - schools, highways, levees, water systems, etc. - and the 10-year approach that Schwarzenegger is taking is not unreasonable unto itself, although it relies too heavily on bonds and too little on gas taxes and other user revenue.

Clearly, however, it was ginned up as a vehicle to restore Schwarzenegger's popularity. He is, in effect, putting his political eggs into a single basket, hoping that he can move the "strategic growth plan" through a Legislature dominated by those who really want him to fail and then persuade skeptical voters to accept the massive debt that it involves.

Democratic legislative leaders are making friendly noises, aware that Californians are generally supportive of public works improvements - providing that they don't have to pay substantially higher taxes for them. Senate President Pro Tem Don Perata, in response to Schwarzenegger's speech, said he and other Democrats support "making sure our roads get better and less clogged and that our ports and flood protection levees are made secure. ..." He and his counterpart in the Assembly, Speaker Fabian Núñez, insist that even though it's an election year, they want to cooperate with Schwarzenegger on making long-needed public improvements.

Even if Perata and Núñez are sincere, however, by elevating his public works package into a must-do goal, Schwarzenegger is engaging in some more hype that could easily backfire on him by providing those who want him to fail with another chance to undermine his legitimacy.

Perhaps it will all play out as the Republican governor hopes, that he and the Democrats (not to mention the somewhat alienated Republican legislators) will link arms and march into the sunset singing "Kumbaya." But it's just as likely that Schwarzenegger will emerge from the year of conciliation just as battered as he did from his self-proclaimed "year of reform."

It's more than likely that Democratic legislators and their myriad interest groups - labor unions, personal injury attorneys, etc. - will seize on the infrastructure package as leverage, demanding that Schwarzenegger give ground on such issues as an increase in the minimum wage, modification of his much-vaunted workers' compensation reforms, or perhaps driver's licenses for illegal immigrants, and adopt softer administrative attitudes on such issues as new contracts for state worker unions.

If he does allow himself to be squeezed like a navel orange, he'll look weak and desperate, even if he gets his public works bonds, and he'll have problems with his Republican base. If he balks, the bonds would be caught in the stalemate, forcing Schwarzenegger to campaign with another failure on his record.