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## **Dan Walters: Once again, Schwarzenegger wimps out**

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There is – or at least should be – only one standard by which to judge Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's latest budget proposal: Does it stop the "crazy deficit spending" that he pledged to end when he was elected five years ago, or at least make significant progress toward fiscal responsibility?

Sadly, not only is the answer "no," but Schwarzenegger has apparently abandoned even the pretense of truly balancing the state's books, and would bury the state even deeper in the quicksand of borrowed money, bookkeeping gimmicks and pie-in-the-sky assumptions on revenues and spending.

This seemingly endless cycle of mounting debt – the governor now wants to borrow billions against a cockamamie, morally bankrupt increase in state lottery revenues – is not only tiresome but contributes to California's wholly deserved reputation of being a state that can't govern itself.

Schwarzenegger often describes himself as a "postpartisan" centrist, which sounds fine on its surface. But in practice, as his budget crystallizes, it means embracing the unwillingness of the Democrats to seriously reduce state spending, the equally adamant unwillingness of Republicans to raise taxes, and the willingness of both parties to continue running up the state's nearly maxed-out credit cards.

The governor, one assumes, wouldn't tolerate such irresponsible and ultimately self-destructive behavior in his personal businesses. But for some reason he wallows in it as governor, even as he continues to deliver high-sounding paeans to fiscal prudence – "we can't spend money we do not have, plain and simple," he said with a straight face Wednesday – and insists that he wants some long-term budget reforms to prevent future deficits.

This budget is – or at least should be – dead on arrival in a Legislature that's made up almost exclusively of very liberal Democrats and very conservative Republicans. Unfortunately, however, its ultimate successor is not likely to be a realistic, if politically difficult, reconciliation of their mutually exclusive positions, but rather something even worse than what Schwarzenegger proposes, another "get out of town budget" of the ilk seen for most of this decade.

This is, as stated earlier, very tiresome and in abstract terms very disrespectful of the 38 million men, women and children Schwarzenegger and the legislators were elected to serve. These phony budgets, often based on nothing more than

supposition and wishful thinking, imply that Californians can't be trusted with the unvarnished truth and are unwilling to face reality.

Oddly enough, public opinion polls say otherwise. They reveal that California voters may not like the choices that the budget deficit poses, but they're largely willing to accept what's necessary, whether it be spending cuts or new taxes, to bring income and outgo into balance.

Schwarzenegger should take what's left of his credibility, which has been declining sharply in recent months, and tell Californians the truth about the fiscal mess he inherited five years ago but that he has been unable – and in fact, largely unwilling – to clean up. For all his macho talk the governor has wimped out time after time on the budget, from restoring a multibillion-dollar car tax cut that the state could not afford to bowing to influential pro-spending pressure groups.

If simple duty is not motivation enough, he should remember that no matter how many self-congratulatory speeches he delivers, how many tributes to "postpartisanship" he utters, or how many news magazine covers he adorns, his governorship will be an utter failure if he cannot deliver on that 2003 promise to end "crazy deficit spending" and bring order to the state's finances. And given his unique opportunity to govern, history will be a harsh judge of that failure.

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