

THE 1994 CAMPAIGN: CALIFORNIA;
Media-Wise Governor Runs A Smooth Race in California

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Body

If he had stumbled, it could have been an awkward moment for Gov. Pete Wilson's re-election **campaign**, but you would never have guessed it. **California** cool, sound-stage **smooth**, he gives nothing away; you can no more read his emotions in his face than see through a mirror.

His big issue is illegal immigration. He has dramatized his promises to do something about it by endorsing Proposition 187, a ballot initiative that would require the state's schools, hospitals and other institutions to deny services to illegal immigrants, who come mainly from Mexico. As the proposition has gained strength, so has he, and together they have pulled well ahead in the polls.

But Mr. Wilson has always had a lot of trouble with his party's right wing, and this week two leading Republican conservatives, Jack F. Kemp and William J. Bennett, both members of George Bush's Cabinet, denounced the ballot measure, describing it as "fundamentally flawed and constitutionally questionable."

Reporters caught up with the **Governor** in an aircraft-assembly hangar in Long Beach. Nobody had to tell him it was time to play the Beltway card.

"Those are two guys who have been in Washington too long," he said with his tight, mirthless smile. "Nice guys, but when you spend too much time in an ivory tower, you lose touch with reality. They ought to come out to **California** and look at the real world."

Sound bite. Next question.

"In a state as large as this," the **Governor** of the nation's largest state said later on board a private jet, heading north, "people don't have time for a lot of fine points. You have to be crystal clear. We think people are most deeply moved in three areas: crime and immigration -- a real sense of rage about those -- and jobs, which is their broadest, most long-lasting concern. So that's what we hit on, morning, noon and night."

THE 1994 CAMPAIGN: CALIFORNIA;Media-Wise Governor Runs A Smooth Race in California

Running a tightly focused, politically adept campaign has helped Mr. Wilson overtake his Democratic rival, Kathleen Brown, the state treasurer, who is the daughter and sister of former governors. So has Ms. Brown's late-starting effort, which has somehow failed to capitalize on this year's anti-incumbent mood, even though she is running against a man who has held public office without a break since he was elected to the Assembly in 1966, a man right up there in Edward M. Kennedy's and Mario M. Cuomo's and Thomas S. Foley's class when it comes to incumbency.

Mr. Wilson's own analysis was dismissive if not condescending.

"In terms of energy and polish, she's fine," the Governor said of his opponent. "But from the voter's standpoint, she's saying the wrong things."

Perhaps. Like President Clinton and other leading Democrats, Ms. Brown is opposed to Proposition 187.

But that would not have mattered much without this year's upturn in the California economy, which for Mr. Wilson could not have come at a better moment. The rising economic tide may not be lifting President Clinton's boat much, but it has floated Mr. Wilson's skiff off the rocks in the last few months.

Four years ago, having won a third solid statewide victory in eight years, Mr. Wilson left the Senate and moved to Sacramento. California's politicians, accustomed by the successes of Richard M. Nixon and Ronald Reagan to setting their sights high, began talking about him as a probable Presidential candidate.

But then came a sharp, sudden economic downturn, driven by trouble in aerospace and real estate. It quickly produced a \$14 billion state budget shortfall, to which the Governor responded with a \$7 billion tax increase and \$5 billion in spending cuts. His approval ratings plunged, and he cut state spending further, admitting that it had been a policy as well as a political error, and a bad one, to raise taxes at a time when the California economy was in the dumps.

By the beginning of this year, the 61-year-old Mr. Wilson's prospects for a second term, let alone a race for national office, seemed close to nil.

That all seems a long time ago now. Then, he felt cornered, and it showed in his defensive explanations. Now, he feels freed, and that shows, too, as he feeds his audiences, stop by stop, day by day, little bits of evidence that California has touched bottom and is on the way back. He sounds like a chamber of commerce news release come to life.

In Anaheim, he tells them that Inc. magazine says, "Twice as many of the 500 fastest-growing entrepreneurial companies are in California as in any other state." In Santa Clara, in the heart of Silicon Valley, he quotes a bank's prediction, quoted in that morning's Wall Street Journal, that the state will grow by about 4.8 percent next year. In Chatsworth, not far from the epicenter of the Los Angeles earthquake, he talks about how many Fortune 500 companies have moved their headquarters here.

At every stop, he praises the people of California, whom he calls "the most innovative and entrepreneurial people the good Lord has ever created."

But he also praises Pete Wilson. What turned things around, he says, is his work in making California a better place to do business. He cites reform of the state's "onerous" workers' compensation laws and the efforts of his bureaucracy-fighting "Red Teams," the expansion of state export-loan guarantees and the enactment of a law allowing a 6 percent tax credit on manufacturing equipment.

Not exactly crowd-rousing items, those, but then he is not exactly speaking to crowds. There is not much glad-handing or other retail campaigning.

This is California, the media state par excellence, and like other candidates here Mr. Wilson usually appears not at rallies but at carefully scripted political mini-events, one-act plays intended to make a single point and planned with

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an eye to picture possibilities ("Don't get in the shot, don't get in the shot," the advance men cry at every stop when some unruly worker or onlooker strays into the camera's range).

Show business is never far away in California, and the Governor's trip this week was described, on the yellow and black cover of an explanatory document, as "Pete Wilson's Greatest Hits Jobs Tour."

Thus, Tuesday's Chatsworth visit was meant to show, as the Governor likes to say, that "California can compete with South Carolina or Singapore" when it comes to high-tech industry, and indeed the ADC Fibermux plant, which makes circuit boards for computer networks, starred in its assigned role. It looked as spotlessly clean and felt as over air-conditioned as Singapore, and it was staffed largely by Asian-Americans.

At almost every stop, someone stepped up to give Pete Wilson credit for making California government friendlier to business, a partner instead of an adversary. In Long Beach, for example, Dr. Carl Chen, the founder of Advanced Aerodynamics and Structures Inc., the first new American builder of airplanes in decades, said his company had been courted by many states and by countries from South Korea to South Africa, because of its potential for creating jobs.

"Because of Governor Wilson and his reforms, we decided to stay in California," Dr. Chen declared.

Sometimes the little shows are convincing, sometimes less so. In Santa Clara, the occasion was the announcement by Intel, the computer chip maker, that it planned to enlarge its plant here, a project that will cost \$500 million and create 300 jobs. Mr. Wilson said this demonstrated once again the company's commitment to California and his Administration's success at cutting red tape.

In fact, Intel has also promised in the last 18 months to build factories costing more than \$1 billion in Arizona and New Mexico, choosing those states in part because they offered better tax breaks and lower regulatory hurdles.

The details have nagged a bit at Mr. Wilson on the immigration question, too. Experts on the subject trace part of California's problem to a bill in 1986 that allows illegal immigrants to come here as agricultural workers. Mr. Wilson, then a Senator, had a hand in drafting the measure, but he insists that his version would have forced the illegals to return home after the harvest. That safeguard, he says, was dropped in the bargaining on the bill.

Looking a little like a prep-school teacher in his tweedy clothes, the Governor plows diligently through his arguments: Services to illegal aliens eat up 10 percent of the state's budget; that means fewer computers for schoolrooms and fewer new hospital beds; that is unfair to the people of California, and the Federal Government ought either to seal the border or foot the bill. Whatever else it is, this is a campaign about real issues, unlike many others this year.

On crime, Mr. Wilson takes the high road ("I am privileged to be the first Governor in the nation to sign a three-strikes-and-you're-out bill into law," he said in an Eastman Kodak warehouse in Hollywood) as well as the low. No matter what Ms. Brown says to suggest that she, too, is tough on crime, he tars her with her father's and her brother's aversion to the death penalty and their tolerance of what he terms "our absurdly lenient laws on repeat offenders."

Many of those around him, including contributors, old friends and staff members, fully expect to hear lines like that from the candidate Wilson in the 1996 Presidential campaign. California now casts nearly 10 percent of the votes in the electoral college (and a similar percentage of those at party conventions). Its primary will be early in 1996, not late, making it far more important. A victory for Mr. Wilson would place him in a distinctly strategic position.

But he insists that he will not run. Is that an irrevocable no, a Shermansque no, a not-even-a-draft no? "It's a no," he said, adding that he was looking forward to serving out a second full four-year term in Sacramento.

He may not mean it, though he reminds people that Mr. Cuomo said, no, and made it stick. If he does shun a White House bid, one reason may be a quirk in California law. Candidates for governor and lieutenant governor run separately, and the clear front-runner for the No. 2 job this time is Gray Davis, a very liberal Democrat who served as chief of staff to Governor Edmund G. Brown Jr.

THE 1994 CAMPAIGN: CALIFORNIA;Media-Wise Governor Runs A Smooth Race in California

It is quite possible, Mr. Wilson allowed drily, that the voters would resent a **Governor** who was elected after a **campaign** in which he indulged in Brown-bashing only to spend a year or so traipsing around the country, leaving a Brown acolyte in charge back home.

Graphic

Photo: Gov. Pete Wilson, left, **campaigned** in San Diego on Friday. He talked with Tracy Santanen, a trainee welder at the National Steel and Shipbuilding Company, and Dick Vortmann, the company's president. (Jim Wilson/The New York Times)(pg. B8)

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