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Should Conservative Christians Vote for Mr. Schwarzenegger?

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Politics, as famously defined, is the art of the possible. Pragmatic judgments and trade-offs are the routine business of the politician, and even the most principled candidate must first be elected in order to serve. Compromise is the order of the day, and many politicians tailor their position statements to match the public's mood, regardless of conviction. All too often, the real rulers are the pollsters.

For this very reason, Arnold Schwarzenegger appears to be the perfect candidate for the California electorate. He is a high-profile celebrity in the midst of a celebrity-driven culture. He is basically liberal on social and moral issues, running in a state that cherishes these liberal positions as evidence of sophistication and liberation. The "Left Coast" didn't get that label by accident.

A majority of Californians are social liberals—but they might support a fiscal conservative, especially given the state's financial crisis. Then again, this is a state that demands low taxes and expansive government services—an impossible combination under any governor.

Republican leaders in California seem certain that Arnold is their man to recapture the governor's mansion. They persuaded Bill Simon, a social and fiscal conservative and the 2002 Republican nominee, to drop out of the race to clear the way for Schwarzenegger. These same leaders are now putting pressure on state Sen. Tom McClintock to follow Simon out of the race. This may be unlikely, because McClintock [now running third in some polls with 13% of likely voters] sees himself as the only real conservative in the field.

The logic behind the party's effort is straightforward. If Schwarzenegger splits the Republican vote with McClintock [and others trailing far behind in the polls], Lt. Gov. Cruz Bustamante, a liberal Democrat, may sail into office, thus consolidating Democratic Party dominance of the state's government—perhaps for years to come. That's just too high a price to pay, argue these powerful Republicans. Better to support Arnold and get a Republican in the governor's mansion. End of argument.

This logic is shared by keen political observers on the national level. Michael Barone of U.S. News and World Report calls Schwarzenegger "California's Action Hero," poised to remake the Republican Party's image. Barone claims that Republicans have been losing state-wide elections in California "because of their conservative stands on cultural issues," and opposition to immigration. Once in office, Barone promises, Gov. Schwarzenegger would be able to "create an environment in which [President] Bush could seriously contest the state" in the 2004 elections. That sounds nearly irresistible to party leaders tired of losing races for the state's highest offices.

Not so fast, argue many conservatives. What good is a governor—Republican or Democrat—who supports abortion rights, domestic partnership laws for homosexuals, and sends liberal signals across the cultural divide? National Review

magazine labeled Schwarzenegger a “liberal Republican” who is “pro-abortion, pro-gay rights, and pro-gun control,” who “does not merit conservative support.”

Radio phenomenon Rush Limbaugh joined the fray on the opinion page of *The Wall Street Journal*. Schwarzenegger “has yet to embrace any conservative positions,” Limbaugh lamented, “And California needs a large dose of conservatism.” Limbaugh pointed to Ronald Reagan as a conviction politician driven by ideas, compared to Schwarzenegger’s campaign by celebrity. Addressing those who argue that a genuine conservative can’t win, Limbaugh retorted: “We conservatives didn’t get where we are today with this kind of attitude and we can’t lead in the future with this kind of attitude.”

Some will be satisfied—at least for now—with Schwarzenegger’s recent no-tax pledge and purported fiscal conservatism. But what about those cultural issues? And what about the character questions from Schwarzenegger’s past? [See yesterday’s Web Log below] Can authentic conservatives and Christian voters support a candidate who says he has “no sexual standards in my head that say this is good or this is bad?” Or, that heterosexuality and homosexuality are “all legitimate to me?” Should pro-life voters be satisfied with Mr. Schwarzenegger’s rather vague support for parental notification laws and opposition to partial-birth abortion? Is his support for domestic partnership laws for homosexuals [but opposition to homosexual marriage] an acceptable compromise?

Admittedly, no candidate—or statesman—is perfect. A strong doctrine of original sin helps to explain the behavior of the political animal. Martin Luther, the great 16th-century reformer, once remarked that “a wise prince is a rare bird indeed; still more a pious prince.” A virtuous ruler is a shocking exception, said Luther, and “one must constantly expect the worst from them and look to little good from them.” Once in office, the politician rarely improves over his established character and convictions.

Christians committed to the sanctity of human life and the protection of marriage will have a hard time voting for Arnold Schwarzenegger. Is there any reason to expect that Mr. Schwarzenegger will be more pro-life and pro-family when in office? Would he put himself on the line for parental notification laws and against partial birth abortion? If he cares about those issues, why is this known only now?

Voters concerned with personal character have to deal with those lingering questions about Schwarzenegger’s sexual morality, drug use, and vulgarity as revealed in the “Pumping Iron” film and the Qui interview. His response that voters should simply “understand that when they read an interview from 1979 or 1977 to differentiate that from today” is not likely to set minds at ease. That was then and this is now? Sexual promiscuity does not have a moral statute of limitations. Does Schwarzenegger admit that this behavior was reprehensible?

Those who support Schwarzenegger in spite of these concerns will argue that the realities of the political situation demand it, and that Schwarzenegger, though not a cultural conservative, is a step in the right direction. Let’s take what we can get, they urge.

That approach is called political incrementalism. The argument is that voters should gain whatever political ground they can win, rather than vote for a lost cause. A vote for any candidate other than Arnold Schwarzenegger is a vote for Cruz Bustamante, they argue. At this point they may be right, at least thus far in their assessment. What is lacking in this argument is a real strategy to elect a genuine conservative. Political incrementalism is an ever-present argument, and no politician or voter is innocent of this calculation. But incrementalism can only be justified when part of a larger strategy to reshape the political equation and elect a leader who genuinely represents conservative conviction.

The election of Arnold Schwarzenegger would probably succeed in reshaping the political equation, but perhaps in a direction most displeasing to conservatives. If Arnold Schwarzenegger’s combination of fiscal conservatism and social liberalism becomes the “new image” of the Republican Party, the pro-life, pro-family, and pro-marriage cause will be set back a generation or more. This is exactly what Christians concerned for these issues should fear.

Moral principles and pragmatic judgments are often at war in the political sphere. Losing the recall election would be costly, but winning with Arnold Schwarzenegger might cost far more.

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