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California Chaos and Celebrity Candidates: Headline Friday

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Friday, September 26, 2003

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California Chaos

The recall election is back on for October 7, after an eleven-judge panel of the Ninth U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals handed down a unanimous reversal of a three-judge panel just last week. The infamous Ninth Circuit is always reading the headlines, and the reversal was not unexpected. The three-judge panel's decision putting the recall election on hold was based on a finding that the use of punch-card ballot systems in four large counties would lead to a denial of voting rights for some citizens, primarily minorities.

The argument was laughable on its face, for these same machines were found to be sufficient to elect Gray Davis governor in 1998 and 2002. The judicial panel claimed to be applying the argument of the U.S. Supreme Court in the case *Bush v. Gore*, but the larger panel was unpersuaded. Warnings of another "hanging chad" crisis were overcome by common sense. If the three-judge panel's decision had stood, far more than the California recall election would have been at stake. The panel's decision effectively meant that the Constitution's equal protection clause would require every voter to use the same voting technology, if there could be any chance that one technology might be even slightly more prone to error than another.

If not corrected at a lower level, the case would surely have gone to the Supreme Court. In the end, the larger panel of the Ninth Circuit rescued itself from certain humiliation. The case reminds us again [as if we needed reminding] of the over-reaching arrogance of many federal judges. They would make themselves legislators as well as jurists. And they act as an aristocracy of wisdom, certain that they know what is best for the entire society, and that they should protect the voters from themselves.

Once the race was back on, attention turned to Wednesday's prime-time debate, the only event candidate Arnold Schwarzenegger had agreed to attend. The "debate" was not much of a debate at all. In fact, the event showcased the breakdown of real political debate in America. Serious issues were treated like raw bait thrown to attention-starved sharks.

The resulting feeding frenzy was all about camera time and attention—not about the issues. Schwarzenegger acted like a celebrity comfortable in front of the camera. He made no major gaffes, and looked reasonably like a serious candidate. Given the low expectations nourished by his staff, he probably "won" the debate. Arianna Huffington, the once-conservative-now-liberal-eternally-ambitious media commentator was so hyperactive that most viewers were probably convinced that, if Arianna ever got to the Governor's Mansion, the whole state would be in therapy. Lt. Governor Cruz Bustamante, slipping in the polls, pulled tried to pull the biggest farce of the evening by arguing that the state's budget crisis was due to politicians who "spent too much." Really, Cruz? And just who might those politicians be? He may be the only candidate running against himself.

State Sen. Tom McClintock—who still insists that he is in the race to stay—had the best arguments, the best command of the facts, the best proposals for fixing the state's problems, and the best political record. It probably won't matter. He will

likely finish no better than third place.

Celebrity Candidates

The Age of Celebrity is producing a new political class. Following in the recent tradition of former Minnesota governor [and former professional wrestler] Jesse “The Body” Ventura and Arnold Schwarzenegger, two new celebrities have announced political ambitions. Marina Navratilova, the 47-year-old former tennis champion, announced September 24 that she is considering a run for office in the United States. Born in Czechoslovakia, Navratilova won a record nine Wimbledon singles championships, but retired from tennis in 1994, only to return in 2000. She now lives in Colorado, and seems to be inspired by Schwarzenegger’s run to replace Gov. Gray Davis in California. “If Arnold Schwarzenegger can run for governor in California, then who knows? I have the muscles,” she said.

Navratilova came out of the closet as a lesbian several years ago and became an activist for gay rights. She spoke at the march on Washington in 1993 and fought Colorado’s Amendment 2, which prevented the state from extending special rights to homosexuals as a class. [The amendment was later ruled unconstitutional by the U.S. Supreme Court. See Tuesday’s Web Log below.]

Martina would represent something new in American politics. Jesse Ventura and Arnold Schwarzenegger have shown that a professional wrestler and a former professional body builder can play the game of politics, but Martina would be the first lesbian former tennis champion to make the switch. If she plans to run in Colorado, the battle will be uphill. Not surprisingly, she holds very liberal political views. She expressed her displeasure with the current state of politics in her adopted country and complained that “the conservative party is too strong.” Presumably, she meant the Republican Party –but then, who knows? Advantage: Whoever runs against Navratilova.

Back in California, actor Kelsey Grammer has announced interest in a run for the U.S. Senate. Grammer, known for his starring role in NBC’s *Frasier*, made himself a part of American culture through his supporting role in the cast of *Cheers*, a comedy that helped to define the 1980s. Grammer said that he would “probably” run as a Republican and that he considers himself “a centrist” on the political spectrum. He described his political philosophy as “trying to preserve as much opportunity for the individual, as long as the individual chooses to work as hard as he can.”

Grammer grew up the hard way. Born in the Virgin Islands, he saw his father only twice before he was murdered on the family’s front lawn when Kelsey was 13. Seven years later, his beloved younger sister was raped and murdered. Five years after that, his two half-brothers died in a scuba diving accident. Grammer has acknowledged problems with drugs and alcohol, but is known for working hard at his craft. He was the highest-paid actor on television this past season, earning \$1.6-million for each episode of *Frasier*.

The larger issue raised by these two potential celebrity candidates is the question of leadership. The founding fathers designed a government organized as a representative democracy. This system of government, they were confident, would call out the best and most dedicated servants, who would leave their homes and professional pursuits for a season dedicated to public service. The career politician was not what they had in mind. But the idea that a person known primarily as a body builder, wrestler, tennis player, or actor would be chosen by the people for office on the basis of mere celebrity would surely strike the founders as insane.

Welcome to government by celebrity. Jay Leno or David Letterman may be the next to run for high office, surrounded by their bands and supported by the laugh track. This is the politics of mere popularity.

