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California's 'Conservative' Governor

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By Warren Hinckle 3d

SAN FRANCISCO — In his classic study of American democracy, "The American Commonwealth," Lord Bryce declared the political situation in California to be both peculiar and dangerous.

It has always been peculiar. Whether it becomes dangerous depends, as with your average communicable disease, on whether it spreads. Now one of the breeds is about to escape our sun-kissed incubator.

When Ronald Reagan, the conservative superstar, hands the governorship to the Democratic Dauphin, Edmund G. Brown Jr., he will stand in the wings ready to try to wrest the Republican nomination from the fumbling hands of Gerald Ford.

Where the Governor's chances were virtually written off several months ago, his strength is suddenly increasing, out in the Republican hedgerows, he has become Ronnie Populair. At the least, most of the paid political pundits now agree that the former actor will be able to play the spoiler's role at the 1976 Republican convention—he has already threatened to go the Bull Moose route.

What is most peculiar about the Reagan phenomenon is that his increasing national stature appears to be based on the assumption that he has been the successful conservative Governor of the nation's largest state—a welfare-stomper, a budget-slicer, a tax-eater, a hard-nosed cop in a hippie heaven, a man of reactionary action as opposed to liberal hocus-pocus.

Few people in California would recognize such a political profile of Ronald Reagan, who is sometimes hereabouts referred to as "Governor Jellybean," because of the jar of jellybeans he keeps nearby to ward off the munchies, and as a metaphor for his political discipline.

The truth is that as a conservative Mr. Reagan has been a fraud.

He took office in 1967 with a million-vote mandate. He promised to cut welfare, reduce taxes, limit government spending and get tough on

crime. "There are simple answers," he said.

After eight years of simple answers, welfare costs have tripled, taxes have more than doubled, and state spending is up 100 per cent. Under the Governor's law-and-order administration, crime has enjoyed a bull market and the state has become something of a center for mass murders, cult homicides, rioters, kidnappers, mad bombers and freelance revolutionaries.

By almost any objective standard of conservative achievement, the Reagan governorship has been a disaster. His industrial safety director eased up on mine inspectors, and seven men died in a tunnel collapse. While he proclaimed the sanctity of the individual, state doctors were in the forefront of psychosurgery experiments on prisoners. California boasts the nation's largest system of equal-opportunity higher education, yet there are more black people in jail than in college. California is the richest agricultural state, yet farm workers' children are still threatened with malnutrition.

As Governor, Reagan had conservative slogans, but no conservative programs. His usual response to the complex problems of governing was to take refuge in bluster and threats. While he talked nonstop about cost-cutting, the state budget, which was under \$5 billion when he took office, soared to some \$10 billion in 1974.

Most of the heralded conservative moves for which Mr. Reagan has become known nationally have, simply, never materialized. He backed off his controversial plan to slash the state's mental-health services, retreating with a denunciation of psychiatrists as "headshrinkers."

His vaunted "welfare reform" collapsed into statistical mumbo-jumbo, with critics arguing, somewhat convincingly, that the "reforms" were actually costing the taxpayers an additional \$100 million a year.

The essence of Mr. Reagan's "conservatism" is to propose legally or politically impossible solutions to difficult problems, and then blame the courts, or the Democratic opposition, or Big Brother in Washington for failures.

He has been incapable of translating his conservative slogans into legislation. In eight years as Governor, he barely tried—not even when the Republicans controlled both houses of the state legislature, as they did in 1969 and 1970. He seemed to prefer the solitary muse of snipping budget appropriations for school lunches or appointing his "qualified" conservatives to state posts; his token black appointee to the Veterans' Affairs Department believed that the John Birch Society was an important force in integrating Orange County.

The Governor's one serious attempt

to reshape the state government in his conservative image was Proposition I—a 1973 ballot measure to put a ceiling on state spending. It was defeated, largely on the weight of Mr. Reagan's 5,007-word ballot explanation of why it should pass.

His acting abilities have made it possible for the Governor to play the role of the conservative politician without having to deal with the difficult realities of delivering the conservative goods. He did not learn the art of governing, but he mastered the art of conning the press.

For that, he spared no expense—the budget for the Governor's office under Mr. Reagan was double that of the former Governor, Pat Brown. A substantial part of the increase fed a super-smooth public-relations machine.

Mr. Reagan has maintained his high right-wing profile by keeping the press on a regular diet of reactionary one-liners—fillips of the "seen one, they seen them all" genre—such as calling for a "bloodbath" showdown with student demonstrators, or labeling blacks in ghetto riots "mad dogs," or wishing botulism on the canned foods distributed to the poor in the Hearst food giveaway.

Ronald Reagan got into politics under the tutelage of the late Louis B. Mayer and George Murphy during the great Hollywood labor strife of 1945-1948. Mr. Reagan was then a liberal, but he learned to pack a .32 Smith and Wesson for self-protection and, as his acting career declined, began playing the professional conservative. He has gone far.

In the 1940's movie "King's Row," Ronald Reagan plays a man whose legs are amputated at the hip by a sadistic doctor who wants to get even for some small-town slight. Reagan opens his eyes from the anesthesia, looks down, and says, "Where's the rest of me?"

That's a good question.

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