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# From hero to zero: Schwarzenegger and California's abyss (News Feature)

By Andy Goldberg

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Sacramento - He rode in like a genuine action hero in 2003, promising to rid California's largest state of cronyism and financial crisis.

But six years later, Arnold Schwarzenegger's reign as governor of California is in complete disarray, and all the past talk of his parachuting in to the top levels of national politics seems like nothing more than the fanciful script of a slapstick political comedy.

The plight facing California is unfortunately far from a joke. The state, which is ranked among the world's ten largest economies, faces a record-busting deficit of around 25 billion dollars. While this would present few problems for a sovereign state, California is forced to balance its budget and it's not a pretty sight.

Swinging the axe like Conan the Barbarian, Schwarzenegger has proposed spending cuts that would chop 5 billion dollars from school budgets, 2.5 billion dollars from higher education, in addition to cutting state worker wages by 500 million dollars.

There will be wide-ranging health cuts of over 1 billion dollars, closures of 80 per cent of state parks, and the elimination of prisoner rehabilitation programs to save over 1 billion dollars. Also on the line are vocational training cuts of 2 billion dollars.

Schwarzenegger's policies have both Democrats and Republicans seething. Political commentators say he has alienated both parties without anything to show for it and his approval ratings are in the low 30s- an all time low.

Though Schwarzenegger says the crisis is the result of the broken political system he tried to fix, many blame him for the debacle.

'Our Last Action Hero governor has wrecked the state,' blasted one contributor to a political blog who noted that it was the failure of his two voter initiatives that had led to the political and financial impasse. In a strongly Democratic state, the Republican governor has also been widely criticised for proposing spending cuts that fall overwhelmingly on the poor.

Schwarzenegger is hoping his tough-guy determination will see him through the crisis. 'California's day of reckoning is here,' he told lawmakers in an emergency session this week. 'Our wallet is empty. Our bank is closed. Our credit is dried up.'

'People come up to me all the time, pleading 'Governor, please don't cut my program.' They tell me how the cuts will affect them and their loved ones,' Schwarzenegger said. 'I see the pain in their eyes and hear the fear in their voice. It's an awful feeling. But we have no choice.'

Gary Dietrich, president of the non-partisan Citizen's Voice says that Schwarzenegger remains as determined as ever to fulfill his initial promise to reform the California system. 'This is a governor that hasn't had it easy,' he said. 'He was dealt a tough hand.'

Dietrich criticizes the governor for mangling relations with the very lawmakers - and voters - he needs in order to get his policies passed.

While Schwarzenegger and the lawmakers reached a deal in February to plug the deficit, for example, it was derailed when voters roundly rejected a slate of ballot measures that would have allowed the state to borrow some 6 billion dollars.

But the depth of the current crisis could give him an Obama-esque opportunity to push through wide-ranging reforms in one of America's most important states.

'The guy genuinely wants to reform government in California and remake the state in his own image,' Dietrich says. 'He honestly believes this is the moment. As Obama's chief of staff said, 'You never want to waste a good crisis'.'

But political scientist Dave McCue says that the former actor is simply out of his depth in the subtle warfare needed to prevail in the political world.

'He's good at electioneering but not good at governing,' he said. 'He has an ego that's unparalleled in politics, but he doesn't understand the political realities. The thorny problems of governing are simply beyond him.'

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