

THE RECALL ELECTION

After a Shaky Opening, a Candidate Is Born

The Schwarzenegger campaign was in disarray in early August, but a team of savvy political pros helped him hit his stride.

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CORRECTION: SEE CORRECTION APPENDED; Campaign coverage -- An article in Thursday's Section A quoted Mark Bogetich, an Arnold Schwarzenegger campaign aide, as saying "every day was like a week, and every week was like a month." The quotation was accurate, but it directly followed a sentence about Schwarzenegger declining in polls conducted by his campaign in August. That juxtaposition may have implied Bogetich was commenting on the polls. He was not. His comment was directed only at the compressed schedule of the campaign.

Two days after he announced he was running for governor, a tired Arnold Schwarzenegger arose before dawn to be interviewed by satellite on three TV network morning shows. The appearances did not go well.

Hosts pressed Schwarzenegger for specifics, but he offered little but a desire to help business. On NBC's "Today" show, his earpiece failed, making it appear as if he was dodging hard questions. By the time he arrived in Bellflower just before noon for the kickoff of the Inner City Games, the press pack that had marveled at his stunning announcement on "The Tonight Show with Jay Leno" two nights earlier was at full growl.

Late that afternoon, in the offices of Schwarzenegger's production company on Main Street in Santa Monica, the candidate's wife, Maria Shriver, and his small cadre of political aides vented their frustration, directing some at George Gorton, the campaign manager.

According to campaign documents and dozens of interviews with insiders, many of whom spoke on condition of anonymity because of confidentiality agreements they were required to sign, the stretch of days beginning that Friday, Aug. 8, marked the low ebb in Schwarzenegger's effort to become California's leader.

Schwarzenegger had kept his decision to enter the race a surprise even to his political strategists. Offstage at the "Tonight Show," Gorton had stood with a press release in his pocket declaring that Schwarzenegger would not get in the race.

The surprise generated a huge media reaction, but it also got his campaign off to a flat-footed start.

The campaign had no office, no phones, no letterhead, almost no working computers. The candidate also had few positions on issues. His campaign events were limited to content-free stops at the county registrar-recorder's office to pick up election papers and visits to his after-school programs.

But it had one overriding asset -- the multimillionaire movie star at its heart whose campaign was already a worldwide sensation.

Saturday, the day after his poor television showing, Schwarzenegger talked a reluctant Bob White, the former chief of staff to Gov. Pete Wilson, into running his campaign. Schwarzenegger had been chatting with White about politics for years, conversations that often involved the nature of government finance.

To make way for White, Schwarzenegger eased Gorton, a longtime Republican operative who had moved his family from San Diego to Los Angeles the previous year to help the candidate, into a more limited role as an advisor.

White immediately began hiring, tripling the staff in about a week, and he created a structure, with daily staff meetings at 8 a.m. and 6 p.m.

The changes steadied the campaign but did not stop its woes. Campaign strategists largely kept Schwarzenegger under wraps, relying on proxies who hurt as much as they helped.

"The people around Arnold seemed to be star-struck at the beginning of the campaign," said Dan Schnur, who ran Peter Ueberroth's campaign and shares a Sacramento political consulting firm with Schwarzenegger spokesman Rob Stutzman. "They were letting him campaign like a movie star."

The campaign trumpeted billionaire investor Warren E. Buffett as an economic advisor, only to see him suggest in the Wall Street Journal that California's property taxes were too low. The Howard Jarvis Taxpayers Assn., which had been planning to endorse Schwarzenegger, pulled back, according to a campaign official.

Wilson, the former governor, gave a television interview in which he announced that Schwarzenegger had supported Proposition 187, the initiative to deny public services to illegal immigrants which had been the centerpiece of Wilson's own reelection bid in 1994. The initiative, and Wilson, remain highly controversial among Latino voters.

When Schwarzenegger finally did make a public appearance, on a street in Huntington Beach, it almost became a disaster. The candidate was jostled by an unruly crowd of beachgoers, and reporters were nearly trampled. Local police and the campaign ended up blaming each other for the lack of crowd control.

For future events, Pat Clarey, the campaign's scheduler and a key lieutenant to White, found the central question for prospective venues became: "How

many bicycle racks do you have?" The metal racks were used to provide a barrier over which the candidate could shake hands without being trampled by eager fans.

Clarey and the advance team also had to use more private facilities and ticket events, to better control the rock-star reception for the candidate.

Two weeks in, the campaign's polls were showing a decline from the day of his announcement. And time in the short race was running out. "Every day was like a week, and every week was like a month," said Mark Bogetich, who did opposition research for Schwarzenegger.

Needed: a Theme

The campaign lacked both a compelling theme and a field general. Over the middle two weeks of August, both problems would be addressed.

The theme came first. Over that first, gloomy weekend, the campaign's ad-maker, Don Sipple, faxed Schwarzenegger a memo, without telling Gorton, which outlined a populist argument that would become the campaign's centerpiece.

Schwarzenegger should portray himself as the "governor of the people," as contrasted with Davis' appeals to "special interests," the memo said. Soon phrases from the memo began appearing regularly in Schwarzenegger's remarks.

To resolve the field general issue, Sipple teamed up with White to recruit Mike Murphy, the Republican strategist who had successfully managed campaigns for governor for John Engler in Michigan and Jeb Bush in Florida as well as John McCain's bid for the White House.

Murphy at the time was working in the former Soviet republic of Georgia, for an opposition political party.

He had made a trip to California before Schwarzenegger's announcement to talk about working for former Los Angeles Mayor Richard Riordan, who was considering running for governor. He heard the news of Schwarzenegger's announcement while sitting by the pool at the Four Seasons Hotel in Beverly Hills; the next day, Riordan, who had said he would run only if Schwarzenegger didn't, took him to breakfast at Shutters in Santa Monica, then to a meeting with Schwarzenegger.

But Murphy was wary of working on the Schwarzenegger campaign, fearing the candidate would have too many conflicting strategists. He left Los Angeles for a vacation in Mexico without signing on.

Within the campaign, Sipple, who had worked with Murphy on Sen. Bob Dole's 1996 presidential campaign, pushed for him. So too did Shriver, who knew of his reputation as a skilled campaign tactician.

A week after meeting Schwarzenegger, Murphy returned to Los Angeles and met with White. During his stay in Los Angeles, Murphy helped out with the Aug. 20 meeting of Schwarzenegger's Economic Recovery Council, headed by Buffett and former Secretary of State George P. Shultz. But Murphy sneaked out of the LAX Westin, where the event was held, through the hotel kitchen so reporters wouldn't notice him.

Murphy said he would work with Gorton but insisted on being able to run the campaign's strategy, move personnel around and bring in three long-time aides, including Todd Harris, who had worked with him as the spokesman for the McCain and Jeb Bush campaigns.

He also insisted on keeping to a contract that bound him to spend five days in Tbilisi, the capital of Georgia. Word of his appointment leaked while he was there, and he flew back to Los Angeles.

After Labor Day, Murphy showed up at campaign events and offered reporters a simple argument for Schwarzenegger's candidacy. "We represent change," he said. "Davis and Bustamante represent the failed policies of the past."

After joining the campaign, Murphy built a war room, moving the campaign's computer and Internet team from an office on the second floor of campaign headquarters, hidden behind the policy shop. A huge calendar was affixed to the wall, listing Schwarzenegger events, themes for the day and the schedule of ads being produced by Sipple.

Murphy also scheduled more appearances and opened up the candidate more to media scrutiny. The candidate did an extensive press conference with reporters in Riverside the Thursday after Labor Day. At Sipple's suggestion, Schwarzenegger did a half-dozen "Ask Arnold" events, pseudo town halls where friendly groups were invited to send representatives to quiz the candidate.

"Murphy made [Schwarzenegger] behave more like a candidate," Schnur said.

Schwarzenegger's staff started to issue detailed position papers -- on workers' compensation, the economy, the state's building and construction code, education, the environment.

The policies were rolled out so frequently that reporters were often forced into questions about proposals, rather than Schwarzenegger's shortcomings, which created stories of the candidate discussing policy.

"I don't think Mike cares that much what the workers' compensation proposal said," said Schnur. "What he cared about is that Arnold was addressing the issues, and that voters understood that. Mike understood that the biggest credibility hurdle that a celebrity candidate would face was knowledge of public policy."

Help From a Wonk

The job of preparing Schwarzenegger on policy fell largely to Paul Miner, a nerdy, 39-year-old policy wonk who hit it off with the movie-star body builder.

Miner first worked for Schwarzenegger last year when the actor campaigned for Proposition 49, his initiative to fund after-school programs. By the time the campaign ended, Schwarzenegger aides say, the candidate had come to consider Miner almost part of his family.

Miner was at Schwarzenegger's side throughout the campaign, offering tutorials on issues. Schwarzenegger kept a yellow legal pad he would fill with questions on policy that Miner would answer.

"Paul had one of the toughest jobs," said White, the campaign manager. "He literally had to sit there.... He's the wing man."

Miner was joined by a longtime colleague and friend, Jeff Randle, who was assigned to develop a political coalition for Schwarzenegger.

The two men had both gone to UCLA, then met when both went to work for Pete Wilson, then a U.S. senator. Their wives are friends, and their children play together.

Randle also quickly became a Schwarzenegger favorite. The candidate would squeeze his arms and kid him about his lack of muscle.

"It's a reflection of Arnold's comfort level around Jeff," says Miner. "Arnold won't make fun of somebody unless he really likes them."

The two "are not Wilson people really," said one of the campaign's top strategists. "They're Arnold Schwarzenegger people." Both are considered likely to assist him as governor.

Randle's primary concern in the campaign was to work the candidate's conservative flank, enlisting members of the Legislature and prominent groups, including the California Chamber of Commerce and the California Taxpayers Assn., which had not previously endorsed political candidates.

At the same time, Randle declined to respond to the usual detailed questionnaires from interest groups, noting that there was little time.

"Our approach was, 'We're going to win. We'd like to have you on board,' " said Randle. "I decided to use Arnold's time not asking, but thanking people for endorsements. And when a star of Arnold Schwarzenegger's caliber is calling you and thanking you, people don't just hang up the phone -- they come and help."

By mid-September, Schwarzenegger had assembled a large and experienced team. With top consultants being paid the weekly salaries of Major League Baseball pitchers, it was also an expensive, and sometimes divided, staff.

One long-running argument involved whether to launch advertisements attacking Schwarzenegger's opponents. Murphy and Sipple were among those arguing for ads that would criticize Lt. Gov. Cruz Bustamante and state Sen. Tom McClintock (R-Thousand Oaks) over their acceptance of money from Indian tribes who have casinos.

Before that, Schwarzenegger's aides had launched more covert attacks on Bustamante, leaking damaging information to reporters. But the ads could provoke a massive counterattack from the tribes, some Schwarzenegger aides feared.

The campaign debuted the first attack advertisement on the Monday before the Sept. 24 candidate debate in Sacramento, the only such forum that Schwarzenegger had agreed to attend.

Inside the campaign, many of Schwarzenegger's aides were convinced that Bustamante or McClintock would retaliate by attacking during the candidate forum. They were surprised when the criticism never came.

Most Schwarzenegger aides felt their candidate's performance in the debate was only so-so -- a B minus, one senior aide said just after the session ended. But, the aide added, viewers would probably grade Schwarzenegger higher because they had relatively low expectations for him.

Polls bore that expectation out: Voters did not think Schwarzenegger had "won" the debate, but support for him quickly began to solidify.

In the campaign's nightly tracking polls, Schwarzenegger surged from a virtual tie with Bustamante -- in the mid-20s -- to a lead. Two Times polls -- one taken in early September and the other just after the debate -- showed virtually the same shift in the numbers.

Campaign officials also said they benefited from mistakes by rivals. McClintock's acceptance of money from the tribes seemed to undercut his appeal, they said. Davis' signing of a bill to give driver's licenses to undocumented immigrants created a voter backlash in Schwarzenegger's favor. Democrats focused more on rallying other Democrats than reaching out to Republicans and independents.

"They kept appealing to their base," says Gorton. "It was shocking to me."

A week before the election, campaign aides were openly discussing whether they would take jobs in a Schwarzenegger administration. But their plan for what one strategist called a "triumphal march" through the campaign's final days was interrupted by stories in The Times reporting allegations that Schwarzenegger had groped or humiliated several women.

At that point, Shriver took a highly public role. She appeared constantly with her husband, interrupting her schedule to join him midway through a bus tour of the state.

Shriver's famously Democratic family also rallied to the cause, with her mother, Eunice Shriver, showing up unannounced -- and without any request from the campaign -- at an Orange County rally on the campaign's final day.

Aides say Schwarzenegger, who almost never loses his temper, took a philosophical approach in private to the Times stories. A relentless chess player, he spent Monday on his campaign plane, stopping at rallies around the state as he conducted a competitive game with Murphy. The candidate beat the strategist, who protested that the match had been close.

Over the weekend, the campaign's tracking polls had shown the race tightening to a near dead heat. But Monday night, Gorton, who oversaw the polling, noted a large spike for Schwarzenegger, with the actor's support approaching 50% of the vote.

Eight weeks after a stumbling start, Arnold Schwarzenegger, the bodybuilder, businessman and actor, was about to take on a new title -- governor-elect.

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Times staff writer Mark Z. Barabak contributed to this report.

[Reference]

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[Illustration]

Caption: PHOTO: ALL ABOARD: Arnold Schwarzenegger's statewide bus tour comes to a stop at the Capitol days before the recall election.;
PHOTOGRAPHER: Luis Sinco Los Angeles Times

Credit: Times Staff Writer

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