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### Talk: The Candidate

To carry the flag of one's party into battle against a powerful incumbent is an ambiguous honor. Somebody had to run against the Ronald Reagan colossus in 1984; Walter Mondale gamely stepped forward and that's the last anybody heard from him. When the GOP needed a warm body to impale on Bill Clinton's 1996 incumbency, Bob Dole raised his hand and consigned himself to a retirement of speaking the words "erectile dysfunction" into television cameras. Nobody will ever know if Mondale or Dole really thought they could win. They may not know themselves. They did it for their parties. They did it for their country.

Now comes Phil Angelides, metaphorically clutching five smooth stones as he steps onto the battlefield against Arnold Schwarzenegger. Angelides, a tall, reedy man of fifty-six who has been California's treasurer since 1998, won the Democratic nomination for governor on June 7. We caught one of his first post-primary campaign events last week, at the Foothills Family Medical Clinic, a tiny storefront office suite in a funky neighborhood of east San Jose. Angelides slipped in the back door, accompanied by his wife, a couple of aides, and one

state trooper in mufti. Threading his way through the warren of tiny examination rooms in a close-fitting black suit, he looked like a preacher on sick call. He opened the door on one room and found ten-year-old Vincent Pilipina and his mother, Rita Saldivar. "I'm Phil Angelides," he said to Vincent. "What are you doing this summer?" After a few pleasantries, he moved on without telling them he was running for governor or asking for their support. He grilled the clinic's executive director, Mark O'Connor, about the clinic's funding (mostly Medicaid and MediCal) and about the number of uninsured children in Santa Clara County (seventy-two thousand).<sup>1</sup> Then he moved into a dim reception area plastered with signs in Spanish and Vietnamese, where aides had set up a lectern and about a dozen supporters waited.

Like both Mondale and Dole, Angelides is an accomplished public servant. Instead of parking billions of state pension-fund dollars in the stock and bond markets, he invested them in inner-city development projects and alternative-energy companies, where they earned as much as they would have in traditional investments but where they could do double work for the state. He faced down Enron during the artificially created power shortage of 2000 by threatening to seize the power transmission lines. He refused to invest state money in

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<sup>1</sup> Mark O'Connor 408-729-4282 or mfoothill@aol.com

companies that relocate offshore to avoid taxes.<sup>2</sup> And he is distressingly willing to explain all this, in exquisite, numbers-rich detail, to anybody who asks and to anybody who doesn't. Calling himself "the anti-Arnold,"<sup>3</sup> and his campaign "revenge of the nerds,"<sup>4</sup> Angelides is ready to pit eye-glazing explanations of his "double bottom line" and "green wave" initiatives against Schwarzenegger's movie-derived one liners – "I'll be back," "hasta la vista, baby" – and demonstrate that Californians are tired of government by personality.

On the stump, Angelides draws attention to his wispy physique by waving his elongated arms, using his very dorkiness as a kind of back-handed reproach to the exaggerated physicality of Schwarzenegger. The same effect though, makes it easy to imagine the governor snapping him like a twig. At the clinic, Angelides spoke with the earnestness of a valedictorian: the kind of guy you'd want to hire for a complicated job, but also reminiscent of another brainy Greek-American – the one who lost the presidency to the first George Bush by ignoring Mencken's dictum never to underestimate the intelligence of the American public. Amid standard attacks on his opponent for breaking promises and siding with the big guy against the little, Angelides said he would provide health insurance to every

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<sup>2</sup> Dan Newman is Angelides's communications director, and he was at the event. 916-448-1998 or dnewman@angelides.com

<sup>3</sup> file "Anti-Arnold"

<sup>4</sup> file "revenge of the nerds"

child in California and lower tuition at the state's universities by repealing tax breaks to big corporations and raising taxes on the rich. Or, as Angelides puts it, "I will ask those who make more than five hundred thousand dollars a year to help me." He refrained from mentioning that the same day he won the nomination, California voters overwhelmingly rejected a tax-the-rich initiative, promoted by the actor Rob Reiner, to fund pre-schools.<sup>5</sup>

A gravel-voiced single mother named Lucille Moyer spoke up from the back. "I fell in the chasm between qualifying for assistance and not having health care," she said. What would Angelides do for her? "My first priority is to cover every child," he told her, "and then I'll move toward universal coverage." A man who appeared to be of east Indian descent said, "a lot of people say children of the undocumented shouldn't get health care; what do you think?" Angelides coughed into his fist and said, "It serves nobody's interest to have children going to school unvaccinated, or sick. This may be the one area where the governor and I agree."

As he enters his first election for a full term as governor, Schwarzenegger, having made a series of embarrassing mistakes, enjoys lackluster support.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, he is still Arnold Schwarzenegger, the übermensch, one of the few genuinely larger-

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<sup>5</sup> file, "pre-school bond dies"

<sup>6</sup> file "Incline To Reelect Arnold 06 08 06.doc"

than-life figures of our day. His public appearances are mobbed, and while people may tell pollsters they are disinclined to vote for him, enough of them hang around the capitol in Sacramento, hoping to get a look at him, that navigating the hallways is tough for the bureaucrats who work there.<sup>7</sup> In addition to unmatched star power, Schwarzenegger fields a campaign staff recruited from Karl Rove's scarred-knuckle gladiator corps,<sup>8</sup> and a war chest the size of a defense appropriation.<sup>9</sup>

After the last audience question had been asked and laboriously answered, Angelides and a couple of his aides invited us to decamp with them next door to El Rincon Taqueria. "Okay if we sit here?" he called to the woman behind the counter. He ordered a glass of water. With the television blaring the World Cup into one ear and the jukebox thundering tuba corridos into the other, Angelides called himself a Democrat in the Harry Truman mold and launched into the kind of unvarnished donkey-speak that hasn't been fashionable since about 1967. "I'm not afraid to say I believe in the power of government to do good," he said. "It's been under those kind of Democratic policies and values that, as a nation, we've seen our greatest advances." He told a long story of his immigrant father making it through the

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<sup>7</sup> My friend Bruce Jennings, who works in the Senate Office of Environmental Quality, tells me this. (916) 324-0894

<sup>8</sup> file "Two Campaign Staffs"

<sup>9</sup> file "Schwarzenegger war chest"

Depression on public relief and returning from the Second World War to obtain an education under the GI Bill, buy a house with a federally insured mortgage, and send Phil to Harvard with federally guaranteed student loans. "I believe in the core values of who we are and what we are as Democrats," Angelides said, "and that puts me in the mainstream of what made America great." In an age of trimming sails to the center, this had the salty tang of forbidden speech. "It's only forbidden speech for those who don't have the courage," he said.

Angelides's most radical departure from the political mainstream, though, is his belief that working Americans have finally stopped identifying with the rich. Schwarzenegger will surely try to tar him with the odium of tax-raiser, he said, but California voters won't fall for it. That tactic has worked in the past twenty-five years only because the Republicans have been able to fool working people into feeling superior to – and resentful of -- those who need assistance. Now, though, almost everybody feels like an underdog, Angelides said. "Working-class people see schools are overcrowded. They see that the chances their kids have aren't like the kids who go private school. They see that people working for thirty, forty years have no pension. It's happening to their neighbors, to people they know personally, and they wonder if they're next." Angelides is betting they'll welcome his levy on high incomes, and that taxation will return as a viable political

option. If he's wrong, he'll take his place alongside Dole and Mondale in their peculiar pantheon. If he's is right, something big has happened. The first poll since the primaries, conducted on June 11, showed Angelides and Schwarzenegger in a dead heat.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> file "Dead Heat." This was confirmed off the record by Mark Mellman, who ran the poll, 202-625-0370