





# Pete Wilson in Review

By Terence McHale

In November of 1962, following his defeat in the gubernatorial race to Pat Brown, former Vice President, Richard Nixon was inside a crowded Los Angeles hotel ballroom delivering a revealing diatribe against the California press. The speech, more of an impromptu soliloquy, was a rambling precursor to the emotionally bare moment when he was forced to resign the presidency eleven years later. It is now the Nixon of memory. The sweaty private fears of a great man being played out punch-by-punch in humiliating detail before a phalanx of cameras and under a bright light.

Proving less than prophetic, the late morning highlight was perhaps the most famous line ever uttered after a California political campaign – “Ladies and gentlemen of the press, think about what you’ll be missing. You won’t have Nixon to kick around any more.”

A young advance man outside the hotel stood at the curb, looking at his watch and wondering what was taking so long. Finally, seeing Nixon emerge, the advance man opened the back door of the car, tapped Nixon with both hands on the shoulders, in much the same manner that a police officer helps a suspect get into the car, and closed the door. He slapped the rear quarter panel as a signal for the driver to take Nixon into temporary political exile.

The advance man had ambitions of his own that were beginning to take form. He was a mid-westerner who’d come to California after graduating from Yale and serving in the Marines, just missing the Korean War, to attend law school at Berkeley, at a time before Berkeley became the Berkeley born from the Free Speech Movement. He’d first seen California almost two decades earlier, just after the war, at the age of twelve, when his dad drove him and his mom in a 1939 Cadillac with retread tires from their home in St. Louis to the magnificent Pacific Ocean.

He would become a man of his time. In 1966 he would be elected to the California State Assembly. He would leave the state legislature to serve as mayor of San Diego before being elected twice to the United States Senate and twice governor of California. He would spend 32 consecutive years in elective office, making friends of millions and colleagues of the most powerful men and women in the world.

The young man’s name was Peter Barton Wilson.  
California Conversations met with former Governor Wilson



in his Los Angeles high-rise office. He greeted us himself, no formality, no secretary or staff running interference, a firm handshake and an invitation to follow him to a back office. He is 72 now. He walks like he always knows where he’s going, his neck extended just a bit, pointing his head forward, his shoulders beginning to slope but still square enough that you get a sense of the man who John Burton, the curmudgeonly former senator from San Francisco called, evidently with some affection, the “fucking little marine”.

Wilson is not a small man, although there is much more presence than size. He has always been good looking, and age has been more than fair. His face has held its shape, very little excess, a healthy skin that is lined without being deeply wrinkled; a ruddiness that probably comes from three Irish grandparents. His eyes have depth. The Pete Wilson of today would be recognizable to anyone who knew

him when he was at Yale on a scholarship paid for by the exclusive Marine Corps officer-training program.

Wilson is an engaging storyteller with a memory for detail and a precise sense of what he liked or disliked about the moment. He told us of meeting another ambitious young lawyer during the Nixon gubernatorial race – the advance man and a hopeful candidate for the Assembly, the two of them watching Nixon speak at the Lakewood Junior High Auditorium, Pete and George Deukmejian, both of whom would become governors and remain lifelong friends. For them those were days of hope and potential, a changing of the guard. Wilson ultimately ended up being in the room for more than forty years when major decisions were being made by California’s most lasting personalities.

**CC:** You delivered one of the eulogies at Richard Nixon’s funeral. There is a beautiful quote at the end....

**PW:** Yes, by Sophocles. One must wait until the evening to see how splendid the day has been.

**CC:** ...was Richard Nixon a political idol of yours?

**PW:** He wasn’t an idol.

**CC:** When did you first meet him?

**PW:** 1962. I had just finished law school and had time to kill after taking the bar, so I volunteered on his campaign and was

made an advance man. It was great fun, a great learning experience, and fairly heady stuff for a youngster.

**CC:** Was Richard Nixon different in private than in public?

**PW:** Yes, I think he was in the sense that if he was with people whom he knew and liked, people whom he felt he could trust, he could relax, he was funny, brilliant, profane and could be a very caring person. He was always nice to the people who worked for him. I think he was a pretty good boss and people who worked for him were devoted to him. People who worked for him really were immensely loyal to him.

**CC:** Did you become close to him?

**PW:** Well, as an advance man I had frequent, but superficial, contact. In the fall of 1965 arrangements were made for me to fly from San Diego to Los Angeles with Nixon to talk about the possibility of joining him to begin working on his campaign for president in 1968. Well, I did and in the course of our conversation, he learned that I had been approached to run for the State Assembly. Now, I had just been made a partner in my law firm about a week before and I had gone in to discuss with my senior partner this possibility of running for office, fully expecting him to throw cold water on the idea, because I thought he'd say, "What the hell, we just made you a partner to do the business I'm bringing in." To my utter amazement, he leaned back in his chair and said, "I think you ought to do it. I think you'd be good at it. Anyway, it's just a two-year term. If you don't like it, you can come back and make money." So I was sharing this with Nixon, and he said, "You better do it. If you don't, it will always bug you. You'll always wonder." He was suddenly much more alive and much more interested. He then proceeded to ask all kinds of questions about the district and to give me some very sound advice.

**CC:** Did you like him?

**PW:** Yeah. I also admired him.

**CC:** During Watergate, you were mayor of San Diego?

**PW:** Yes, I was.

**CC:** Did you talk to him during that period?

**PW:** No.

**CC:** Was there inevitability to Watergate?

**PW:** God, that's hard to say if there's inevitability to anything.

It always struck me as terribly ironic that if Larry O'Brien, the Chairman of the Democratic Party (whose office at the Watergate was broken into by Nixon staffers) had called everyone up at 4:00 every afternoon and said this is what we're going to do tomorrow, if he'd laid his plan out, it wouldn't have made any difference in the outcome of the campaign.

**CC:** I think Nixon won 48 states.

**PW:** Exactly. Exactly. And they got in trouble because of the cover-up. I mean putting the immorality of it aside, which I don't, but it was all handled stupidly. People who were self-starters on dirty tricks did the burglary. And it was stupid. President Nixon should have said, "This was ill-advised and we do not have any excuse. We take the blame because what these people were doing was wrong."

**CC:** Was it painful watching him?

**PW:** Terribly painful, because I think even his detractors would have to give him this; he had a really incisive mind. I saw him on more than one occasion stand up and without a note, hold his audience spellbound. He would go around the world and give you chapter and verse, an in-depth analysis on the countries of interest - had history been different, he might have served another president as secretary of state.

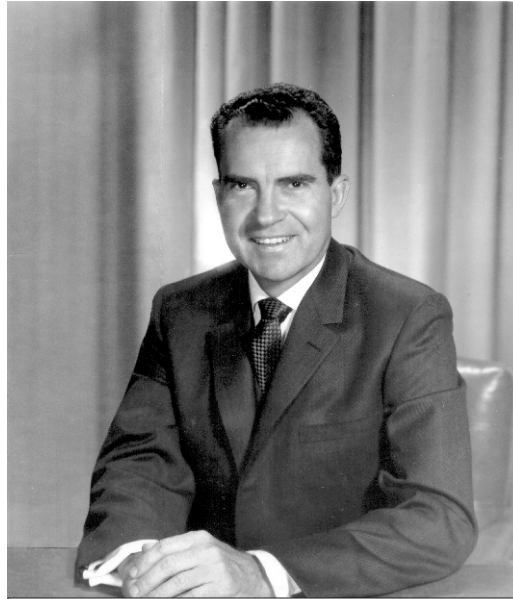
**CC:** And then, of course, the other California president. Ronald Reagan spoke at your 55<sup>th</sup> birthday party. The big joke was that you were still being carded at bars.

**PW:** That's true...(laughs)...

**CC:** When did you first meet Ronald Reagan?

**PW:** I met him briefly once in Chicago in 1965. Of course, I saw his famous '64 speech, *The Speech*, which was the highlight of the Goldwater campaign and explained brilliantly the role of government in our lives. When he started going around the

state in preparation for running for governor in '66, I was involved in party politics, and I was greatly charmed by him. It was hard not to like him - a tremendous speaker, very attractive guy, warm, great storyteller, maybe the best storyteller I have ever known. When the Republican campaign for governor began, George Christopher of San Francisco was the odds-on favorite to challenge Pat Brown for Pat's third term. And, of course, Reagan upset that apple cart.



*Richard M. Nixon - circa 1962*

Courtesy of the Richard M. Nixon Library



*Wilson delivering the eulogy at Nixon's funeral*

Courtesy of the Richard M. Nixon Library



*Pete Wilson was nominated for his San Diego State Assembly seat the same year that Ronald Reagan ran for governor—1966.*

**PW:** It was a ball campaigning with him. I remember the Brown campaign had a television spot that showed Pat saying to a black child, “You know it was an actor who shot Lincoln.” I



remember hearing it on a Sunday, and I thought, “What! He couldn’t have said that, but he did. Pat was a decent guy. I don’t know if he approved his campaign trying to trash Reagan. I introduced Reagan at a small college in La Mesa, and there were kids hanging from the rafters. In my introduction I said the Brown campaign has accused Ronald Reagan of the following charges - then I would recite the charge and I would offer a rebuttal. Well, it worked pretty well and Reagan got a pretty good hand. There was a television set in the far corner. Somebody accidentally turned the thing on and there was an announcer advertising Dryer’s Ice Cream. There was this sort of embarrassed titter. Reagan turned and said “Make mine strawberry.” It was perfect for the moment, and these kids loved that he was relaxed and natural. When he ran for re-election as president in 1984, he started the campaign here in California. The first stop was at a college in Orange County and he was hotter than a two-dollar pistol. The kids couldn’t get enough of him.

**CC:** **Because he was funny and charming?**

**PW:** And because of what he was telling them...personal responsibility. You have a right to be entrepreneurial; I trust you to make better decisions with money you’ve earned than the federal government. Sure, there are things we have as a common obligation. There are people who need help. That’s an appropriate role for government, but government cannot and should not try to do everything. It was what he believed, and it was what they believed.

**CC:** **Are you surprised Reagan is considered**

**one of the great presidents?**

**PW:** No. I think people have made rather fascinating discoveries. “Yeah, he was a pleasant guy.” As to his being a great communicator, “yeah he was terrific with a script.” And what they’ve now been compelled to concede, is that he wrote the script.

**CC:** **If you walked into this room and Reagan and Nixon were sitting at opposite sides of the table, who would you talk to first?**

**PW:** (dismissive) They were different personalities, and I would definitely talk to both of them. You ask whom I would talk to first. I don’t think that’s much of a test. I think Reagan had a gift that Nixon didn’t. He was relaxed. He was a raconteur. He put people at ease in a way Richard Nixon couldn’t. The interesting thing is that as brilliant as Nixon was, one of Reagan’s strengths was that he was continually underestimated. People, his opponents, somehow notwithstanding the fact that they learned to their regret that they were mistaken, persisted in thinking he wasn’t as strong as he was, or had as much guts as he did. And that was a significant part of his personality...I think he’s one of the finest presidents in our history.

**CC:** **Where would you rank Nixon?**

**PW:** One of the most brilliant, and one who was, sadly, flawed.

**CC:** **Is he a tragic figure?**

**PW:** Yeah, I think he is. I think, and that’s why when you ask the question “Was it painful watching him?” Oh God, yeah...

*Loyalty is a continuing theme in the political career of Pete Wilson. It was challenged in 1976 when Ronald Reagan opposed the nomination of his fellow Republican, President Gerald Ford. Wilson, to the surprise of many Californians, did not support Reagan. While the decision prompted the Reagan zealots to assail Wilson, and it was not the politic thing to do for*



*Reagan visiting San Diego*

Courtesy of the San Diego Union Tribune



someone with statewide aspirations in California, no one should have been surprised. Wilson's reasoning was typical of his view. In spite of his personal fondness for Reagan, he didn't believe it was Reagan's turn. Ford had been good to Wilson as Mayor of



San Diego, was always accessible, and as an incumbent had brought people back together after the disastrous events surrounding Watergate. Reagan himself was pragmatic enough to forget. He and Wilson remained close, a friendship that also endured Wilson defeating Reagan's eldest daughter in a contentious senate primary some years later. Today, Wilson sits on the Board of the Reagan Library.

We used this opportunity to ask Governor Wilson about other presidents.

**CC:** Do you like Bush, George Bush 43?"

**PW:** Do I like him? I like him personally, yeah. I think he's doing a good job. (Wilson bobs his head a bit and, as is sometimes a habit, lets a little sound slip from his tightly closed mouth.)

**CC:** Is he smart?

**PW:** Well, as you probably know now, he had better grades at Yale than John Kerry.

**CC:** (laughs) Who was protecting John Kerry?

**PW:** (laughs) John Kerry was protecting John Kerry.

**CC:** Is Bush smart, though?

**PW:** Yes, he is. Smart rather than articulate...

**CC:** Did you get to know President Clinton?

**PW:** I did. We met at the first National Governor's meeting that I attended in '91. The theme of the meeting was Medicaid threatening to bankrupt the states – here were all these governors complaining about having to put up matching funds for Medicaid, and I said, "Look, I'm the new kid on the block but it ain't going to go away unless Democrats and Republicans raise hell in unison. There are members on the committees making these decisions who are in safe districts and have been there forever, and unless we make them uncomfortable they're not going to change, because they don't give a damn, Governors, about our pain." The next thing I know there is this guy kneeling next to me saying he's in full agreement. It's Bill Clinton. He's saying, "You're absolutely right." So we proposed and got adopted the Wilson, Chiles, Clinton amendment sending that message... (Laughs)...I don't think he remembered it once he left the room.

**CC:** Did Clinton let you down as a public servant?

**PW:** Yes. I think he was a man of considerable intellectual energy and curiosity, and he was capable of being very good on policy. He ended up choosing the political path of least resistance.

**CC:** What's his legacy?

**PW:** I don't think he's going to have much of one. I think historians will say of his term in office that he was a man blessed with big personal charm and substantial intellect who had an opportunity to make a significant difference, but didn't, in part because he was distracted, and had to defend himself against an earned reputation, and in part because he ducked the big issues.



Wilson with Gerald Ford during the '76 campaign

**CC:** Have you met Hillary Clinton?

**PW:** I met her at the same meeting I met President Clinton. I was impressed with her intelligence.

**CC:** Is she going to run for the Democratic nomination?

**PW:** It wouldn't surprise me in the least.

**CC:** Who's on the Republican bench?

**PW:** I would simply name the people you already know. I



mean the obvious are McCain, Guliani and Pataki...there are probably five or so that are lined up.

*In November of 1966, Pete Wilson was elected to the Assembly. He would serve until 1971 when he resigned after his election as Mayor of San Diego. We talked about several legislators with whom he served and later worked with when he was governor. We talked the most about Willie Brown.*

**PW:** Willie is, along with Jesse Unruh, probably the most astute Democratic politician I encountered at any level in any legislature. We battled over this damn gerrymandering (the clever drawing of legislative districts to benefit certain candidates) which is an inescapable, inherent, and egregious conflict of interest. The legislature should not have this in their hands. It should be taken away. If we don't, then we get these polarized legislatures in which the general election becomes a mockery because they're all in safe districts on both sides of the aisle...I have observed enough reapportionments to know it brings out the worst in everybody.

**CC:** **Did the two of you go out to dinner...socialize, and talk about issues?**

**PW:** We had dinner when I was governor and he brought over some great wine. (Laughs) Willie and I were also at war when he deliberately strung out resolving the budget for 62 days beyond the constitutional deadline – and we ultimately ended up with a budget the Senate voted for and I supported months earlier – because his reasoning was that the legislature is an abstraction. Most constituents can't tell you who their assemblyman is but the governor is high profile. There's only one and they will blame him that we don't have a budget in the fall. I think he was right that my popularity fell, however, the legislature's fell even more. And there wasn't much change until two years later when I was on the top of the ticket running for re-election, and I think I ran one of the best campaigns I've ever seen. We had an all-star team. Kathleen Brown was a much tougher opponent, I think, than she appeared to be from reflecting back in the memory and numbers of that race.

**CC:** **She was smart.**

**PW:** Smart.

**CC:** **Good name.**

**PW:** Sure. But they didn't run a good campaign. I think she had very bad advice and kept punching me in the fist with her nose. She kept attacking me on crime and the state's economic climate. Well, those happen to be my strengths. So every time she attacked, we could not only rebut it, but also counterattack because her own record was either non-existent or it was weak.

**CC:** **You were down at one point by 18 points, weren't you?**

**PW:** By 24 points.

**CC:** **24.**

**PW:** Yes. We got stronger because I had a record as an assemblymember, mayor, senator and governor of dealing with

real issues. I was there.

**CC:** **Did you like Kathleen?**

**PW:** I liked her, but you know, I liked Dianne Feinstein, too (his opponent for governor four years earlier). Dianne and I, when I was in the Senate, were active collaborators on a number of projects; but then we went against each other for governor in 1990. Well, it puts a strain on the relationship; and I think we're back to being friends with a considerable amount of mutual admiration.

*Pete Wilson first ran for governor in 1978 and after losing in the primary was denied an opportunity to oppose Jerry Brown's*



*re-election bid. He went back to San Diego, where he was immensely popular; although relatively unknown elsewhere, and won his own re-election by big numbers. In San Diego, however, he continued to be viewed as the young politician with great potential, the stubborn executive who battled with the public safety unions and created career length enmity, yet also made the cul-de-sac city in the far south of California into a world class destination. Wilson and Brown were natural rivals – peers, almost the same age, highly educated, articulate, dark and light, the soldier and the Jesuit, extraordinarily ambitious, but quintessentially opposite in their personalities and appeal – they met before the voters four years later in a brutal race for the U. S. Senate.*

**CC:** **Jerry Brown was favored to win your Senate race in 1982?**

**PW:** Yes...well, I should qualify when you say he was favored to win. The day after I won the Republican primary, the polls had me 14 points ahead. And it was not because the voters knew who I was – *they knew who he was*. That was the good news. The bad news was that I was broke because I spent every penny winning the primary. Jerry had about 2.5 million dollars in the bank, which in 1982 was a lot of money, and he said, "To hell with the conventional wisdom that the campaigning doesn't



start until after Labor Day. We have to take advantage that Pete Wilson is broke and is unknown to a great many Californians. We get to define him. We're going on the air and we're going to trash him." And they did. I went from 14 points ahead, the first Wednesday in June in 1982, to being 8 points down by Labor Day. But we spent the summer raising money. So we went on the counter-attack, and Jerry provided abundant material with which to work. I said he's an editing job. We've got more issues here than we've got time or money.

**CC: What was his biggest problem?**

**PW:** He had established a "Governor Moonbeam" image in the media. That was a real liability. Jerry was young, and he got, I think, a lot of bad advice.

**CC: Immature?**

**PW:** Certainly in terms of making policy judgments. I remember the League of Cities meeting where someone would ask a question and he'd say, "How the hell should I know?" They'd laugh and applaud. Then when he started making some tough decisions, and some bad ones, they started fighting with

*"I'm leaving you a twelve billion dollar surplus, but I think the only thing standing between financial ruin for California and the irresponsible legislature that will otherwise achieve it, is you..."*

cucumber." Hearing that didn't trouble me, as you could imagine. And it was true. I know Jerry came out and he had this big sheet of notes and he put them on the ledge of his lectern and they fell on the floor.

**CC: Did the format allow you to confront each other?**

**PW:** The second half we got to ask each other questions. He asked me, "If you were in the Senate what would be your recommendation with respect to what is happening in Namibia?"

**CC: In where?**

**PW:** Namibia. (laughs) He smirked, and I deliberately waited for just a minute. Then I rattled off the answer. There was a moment of silence when I finished and then some woman out in the audience yelled. She let out a whoop, and Jerry looked stricken.

**CC: Did you know much about Namibia?**

**PW:** I had boned up. I had done my homework.

**CC: Are you surprised to see him running for Attorney General?**

**PW:** (chuckle) Well, I should tell you that when I saw him at a memorial for Ken Maddy (late Republican leader and adventurous politician who died prematurely from cancer), he said, "Hey, you see I'm all for jobs now." He'd been mayor of Oakland for awhile and he was all about jobs, and reforming schools, and he was a strong supporter of law enforcement and didn't have time or use for Ebonics... I said, "Jerry, I did see that. In fact, I've got to admit, you've made real progress. I'm convinced that by the time you run for city council, you'll be a real solid citizen."

**CC: Did he laugh?**

**PW:** Yeah, and when I learned that he was going to run for A.G., I thought he loves to hold office.

**CC: After beating Jerry Brown, did you like the clubbiness of the senate?**

**PW:** I should tell you the clubbiness is greatly exaggerated. It was a club in 1940, maybe in 1960, but by 1984 it was a lot less clubby and a whole lot more partisan.



him. He'd run twice for president, I think, before running for the Senate. He was vulnerable on a lot of his appointments. He was vulnerable on Rose Byrd, the law enforcement community, victims' rights people found him to be inept based on the fact that on 64 opportunities his chief justice voted to overturn the death penalty - every time on some sort of technicality. Our first debate was in Fresno in August. Nobody really paid attention, which was a good thing, because he was pretty good.

**CC: Pretty good?**

**PW:** He was better than I was. Then we had a television debate. The station provided the same make-up man, and he did Jerry first. Then the make-up man came to my room and he said, "Oh, you have to feel very good about the contrast between you and your opponent." I said what do you mean? He said, "Well, it's an absolute frenzy up there. There are people running in and out and yelling at one another. You're by yourself, cool as a

*Pete Wilson was California's senator for eight years, holding a job that was a safe bet and could have been his forever. He'd been re-elected by the largest margin in the country. A moderate on social issues, he was willing to promulgate a Republican platform that allowed freedom of choice, and felt so strongly about fiscal restraint that he gained some notoriety when he was wheeled onto the floor after emergency surgery to vote for deficit reduction. The timing of the campaigns was such that he could risk a run for governor and not lose his place in the senate, unless of course, he won, which he did.*

**CC: Can we talk about Gray Davis?**

**PW:** (pause)

**CC: You're shaking your head.**

**PW:** Yeah, well, I didn't have any particular relationship with Gray one way or another. We'd gotten along all right when he was controller. When he was lieutenant governor, there



wasn't much for him to do. Then he won the governorship by a landslide, and he was very gracious and said he'd love to go out to dinner - you and Gail - Sharon and I would like to host you to dinner.

**CC:** Did you have a good time?

**PW:** Very pleasant.

**CC:** Just the four of you.

**PW:** Yeah. He said, "You know, I would genuinely

appreciate any advice you have." I was kind of surprised, and said, "Well, you've had abundant opportunity to observe government for yourself. But since you've asked, I will give you one piece of advice, that I think is of great importance." I said, "I'm leaving you a twelve billion dollar surplus, but I think the only thing standing between financial ruin for California and the irresponsible legislature that will otherwise achieve it, is you. You as governor,

and you alone, have the power to stop the legislature from the irresponsible manner they have manifested time and again." I said, "You can say to hell with an irresponsible budget, go back to the drawing board, I'm not going to sign it, and they'll have to do it." I said, "Gray, if you don't do it, then I guarantee you, the legislature will spend right through that surplus. They'll spend every penny of revenue that the State's legally entitled to collect, and then they'll spend money you don't have, even though there's a flat constitutional prohibition against deficit spending."

**CC:** What was his response?

**PW:** He said, "I hear you."

**CC:** What went wrong, ultimately?

**PW:** (pause) Let's go off the record.

*Pete Wilson was willing to talk about Governor Davis. He was characteristically candid, but did not want his comments to be public.*

**CC:** Arnold Schwarzenegger. What's going wrong?

**PW:** Well, any time you take on powerful special interests, you're going to get some cuts and bruises.

**CC:** Does he come back?

**PW:** Oh, absolutely. I was 24 points down against a very good, mediagenic, highly attractive candidate and we won because we had a better record. We had better positions on issues and we were aggressive. Arnold has much better positions on issues with which the public will connect, and he's a tremendous salesman. In the first place, his winning the recall was unprecedented, and he came to it with the assets of tremendous celebrity, tremendous charisma, and a larger-than-

life figure. I must say, in some respects, he's the best candidate I've ever seen.

**CC:** Better than Reagan?

**PW:** Better than anyone. Reagan was beloved and people wanted to touch him. It's different today and Arnold brings that into the crowd. He loves it. It's meat and drink to him and he's tireless at it.

**CC:** Is his celebrity wearing thin?

**PW:** I don't think so. After the inauguration his ratings were stratospheric and I said, "That's unsustainable. Enjoy it, but don't think you're going to keep it. I don't think Arnold took this job to wear it as a boutonniere and go to the prom. A gentleman Reagan genuinely respected was Canadian Prime Minister, Brian Mulroney, and after he'd left office for a couple of years, he came to USC at the chancellor's request and said, "By the time you

leave office, you should have expended most of your political capital." I agree with that, and I think Arnold does too, and I think he'll be the boldest reform governor since Hiram Johnson.

**CC:** Is he getting good advice?

***"Most constituents can't tell you who their assemblyman is, but the governor is high profile."***

**PW:** A lot of it is. I think he's smart enough to know when people have a vested interest and when they don't.

**CC:** So we're just seeing the beginning of Arnold Schwarzenegger.

**PW:** I think so.

**CC:** Does he run for re-election?

**PW:** I think he will because I think he will recognize that he needs more time to finish the reform. California should have a magnificent future.

**CC:** Interesting that you would say that again. In your 1994 State of the State, you said, "I am convinced that California has a magnificent future." Did you write your own speeches?

**PW:** I've always liked writing. I was very involved in writing my speeches.

*It is not an exaggeration to say there are dozens of men and women who are involved in high level California politics because of the chance they had to work for Pete Wilson during his thirty-two years of elected office. One of the great insults from Pete Wilson is to say someone got bad advice. He liked his staff personally, and empowered them to do their job. The affection with which he is held by former staff is legend, almost*



uncomfortably so. There is a Wilson Alumni that gathers, and the party atmosphere reflects a virtual Moonie devotion with a conservative Chanel flair:

*It is unfair to begin listing those who sat with Pete Wilson*



*because we'd leave out too many who have distinguished themselves. Certainly it is fun to see the old pictures of the wildly wonderful madman, George Gorton, the fearless political consultant from his button down phase, and Marty Wilson, no relation except that he was so trusted, who Wilson team members jokingly referred to as Pete's bastard son when they tweaked senate bureaucrats regarding the strict rule about hiring family members. There are legislators in both houses who began politics in School Pete Wilson. The consistent refrain is that Wilson trusted his people, and that it was so much fun to go to work they didn't want to leave.*

*The two closest to Wilson were no doubt Otto Bos, his press advisor, and Bob White, his longtime Chief of Staff. Otto once said he had one religion and that religion was Pete Wilson. Bob White, always to the bemusement of his boss, was often referred to in the press as the "real" mayor or the "real" senator or the "real" governor. He is as ebullient as Pete is genuinely reserved, an affable, enjoyable man who is also cunning, complicit in tough backroom policy making, unafraid to cut away the lifeboats if it means protecting the main ship, and as political in his bones as he is human.*

**CC:** Talk about Otto Bos.

**PW:** Otto was wonderful. Here's a

kid who comes to this country from the Netherlands when he's 13, cannot speak a word of English, and he winds up being my press secretary. He became as quintessentially American as anybody I can imagine. He was a MASH nurse in Vietnam. He went to San Francisco State and achieved what I think is probably a unique distinction. I think this is true. It seems so implausible that I don't assert it as absolute fact, but I think it is fact. I think he was an All-American on a soccer team that didn't win a game. He was the center halfback, and I guess he was the only one on that team worth a damn. He loved it. You know, that's how he died.

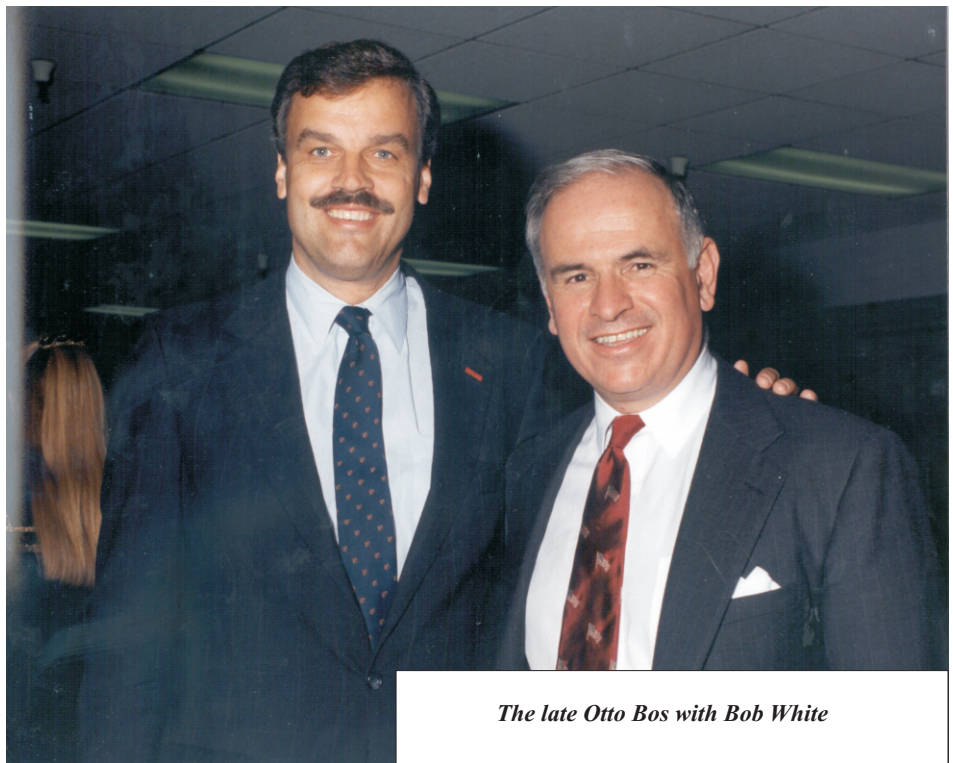
**CC:** Playing soccer?

**PW:** Yeah.

**CC:** What role did he play in your political career?

**PW:** ...my first knowledge of Otto was as a reporter for the San Diego Union. Here was this big, good-looking kid, always joking, a great sense of humor. He was about 6'4". Sweet disposition, nice guy and nice to people, and he could read English upside down. (laughs) I told everybody in the office to put any sensitive document face down when he came in. Anyway, my first press secretary left and we hired Otto to take his place. Well, Otto became ... Otto was remarkably effective because having been a reporter, and a good one, and one who was highly regarded by his peers, he was in a position to deal with them effectively and also be fiercely protective of me. We were more than employer/employee. In many respects, I was like his older brother. And he was great fun to be around...(quiet, long pause)...

**CC:** You talked with him every day?



*The late Otto Bos with Bob White*



**PW:** Oh yeah.

**CC:** **Would Otto Bos come in and say, “Mayor or Senator or Governor, you’re so full of shit on a particular issue.” Was it that kind of relationship?**

**PW:** Yes...(pause – makes that sound again through tight lips and laughs). That’s a good question. I learned a long time ago that there is a terrible danger for anybody who holds political office, but particularly if you’re in an executive role. It’s very easy to become isolated and insulated from reality. That’s fatal. So I said to Bob White, a long time ago, I said, “Bob, you’re the



*Pete Wilson and Bob White at work*

gatekeeper, but understand, that the worst disservice you can perform is to prevent me from learning things I need to know.” I said, “Some things you can tell me because there’s only so much time, and I can’t talk to everybody, but

there are certain people whom I need to talk to. Not only to get the message, but to get it from them.” Bob took that to heart.

**CC:** **Of course, Bob has a healthy sense of himself and wasn’t intimidated by someone else talking to the boss.**

**PW:** That’s exactly right. And, the truth about Bob and me is that we can finish each other’s sentences.

**CC:** **Is that true?**

**PW:** Pretty much, even though we don’t always agree.

**CC:** **Bob is doing well consulting these days. Do you ever think you could be Bob’s chief of staff?**

**PW:** No. (laughter) No, because he couldn’t tolerate it.

**CC:** **Who was there first – Otto or Bob?**

**PW:** Bob. When he left, he’d been with me for 28 years. He was with me in the Assembly, he was with me in the Mayor’s office, he was with me in the Senate, and he was with me in the Governor’s office.

**CC:** **Bob and Otto loved each other too, I would guess, they worked so closely together.**

**PW:** Yes, they did.

*Proposition 187 was written to deny public benefits to illegal aliens in California. It was approved by the voters on November 8, 1994, and is for both Wilson’s detractors and supporters a defining issue.*

**CC:** **Prop 187 – smartest or dumbest thing you ever did?**

**PW:** I would do it again in a heartbeat. There are things you do that you know will not be popular. At the time I took on the role of champion of 187, I had for a couple of years been badgering Congress about the desperate need for California and, for that matter, several other states to be relieved of the financial

burden that has been imposed on us by massive illegal immigration.

**CC:** **You called it one of the great crises of California?**

**PW:** Yes, and it continues to be.

**CC:** **Is there a resolution?**

**PW:** There hasn’t been yet.

**CC:** **Is there going to be?**

**PW:** That remains to be seen.

**CC:** **What’s the future?**

**PW:** Well, the future is that it will either get worse or there is going to have to be a change in attitude on the part of both parties to deal with what I think is an ongoing threat. The sad thing is...

**CC:** **The two parties being Mexico and the United States?**

**PW:** Yes, and the sad thing is this really has nothing to do with race. It has to do with rule of law. It has to do with the cost to the state taxpayers. It has to do with some of the things that have resulted culturally – bilingual education is a terrible disservice to the kids whom it’s supposed to serve, which is why you had so many Latino parents voting against it, or voting to end it – at least half.

**CC:** **Are you wounded by the racism comments?**

**PW:** No, (harsh expletive) but when you ask what are the worst things that have been said about me, that’s one of the worst. One of the saddest things about the campaign for 187 was the fact that I think the opponents probably succeeded in convincing a number of Latino Californians that they were living in a land surrounded by racists – which is just flatly untrue.

**CC:** **The commercial of the illegal aliens crossing the border caused enormous controversy. Would you run that same commercial again?**

**PW:** Sure. I tell you, here’s the thing...

**CC:** **Who thought of the commercial?**

**PW:** It doesn’t matter. I saw it before it aired. I don’t know how many times I’ve read about the deliberate grittiness of the film. It was gritty because it was shot at night. We didn’t shoot it. INS shot it. When I challenged reporters to find one word of racism, they said the ad said, “They just keep coming.” I said, “Yes, so.” They said, “Well, they’re clearly coming from Mexico.” I said, “Are we going to pretend they’re not? That this isn’t happening? Why in the hell is it that our costs for health care, expressly for illegal immigrants, sanctioned by Federal statute, have increased 18 fold in 6 years? How do we think that’s happened? How is it that two-thirds of all the babies born in the public hospitals of Los Angeles County are born to parents who are acknowledged to be in the country illegally? Of course, ‘They just keep coming’ is a simple statement of fact, and it points up the fact that the Federal government is failing to control the border, which is their exclusive responsibility.

*Wilson remains active in policy matters.*

**CC:** **You worked quietly with the late Mike Gordon (Democratic assemblyman who died recently from cancer) to prevent base closures in California?**

**PW:** Mike Gordon’s death was a shame...I enjoyed working with him.



**CC:** The story is you went everywhere necessary to make the case for Southern California.

**PW:** I didn't do it by myself...We were determined to prevent the closure of the air bases and the subsequent impact it would have had to the aerospace industry that is vital to the area...this time we got a reprieve.

**CC:** You were on the dais when democrat Antonio



Villaraigosa was sworn in as the new mayor of Los Angeles...

**PW:** I feel some empathy for Antonio in that he is inheriting a situation not of his own making, as I did.

**CC:** Is LA governable?

**PW:** Yeah, I think it is. It's a handful, it's a challenge. It's huge, sprawling.

**CC:** Can Antonio do it?

**PW:** Well, I hope he can. God knows, I hope he can and if there is some way to help him, I'd be happy to do it. I think he's off to a good start. LA has a huge population. We've got a lot of people that need to be employed and this community, the metropolitan LA area, all of the greater Southern California area, is a huge economic generator, but it faces real challenges. We have some great assets, but we are going to be severely tested.

*The Governor says without being facetious that his wife and his father would both have been better politicians than him. While it is a nice compliment, and an acknowledgement that he is not naturally effusive, it is probably closer to the truth that he enjoyed their outgoing personalities and was lucky to have them in his life. His father lived to be 98 years old. He is proud of his dad – a man who was a reporter during the Depression until he found out he could make eight dollars more per week selling ads. Pete also remains close to an older brother.*

**CC:** Did Mrs. Wilson like being first lady?

**PW:** Why sure, up to a point. She was a natural.

**CC:** You've been married how long?

**PW:** Twenty-two years.

**CC:** How long was your first marriage?

**PW:** Thirteen years...I didn't spend enough time being a husband. I've been lucky in other ways. I kept in contact with

my stepchildren by my first marriage. I love her kids and I'm still close to them. I was working too hard. I always had something to do. Once I remember she said, "You used to be fun when we got married."

**CC:** Are you fun again?

**PW:** Well, most of the time, I think.

**CC:** Is this a happy time of life for you?

**PW:** It's a very happy time, but I'd be lying to you if I told you I didn't miss the old job. It was great fun.

**CC:** Do you miss the trappings?

**PW:** Well, there weren't all that many trappings. I carried my bags before and I don't mind carrying them now.

**CC:** Sixty years later, almost, when you look back, does a 12-year-old kid today have the same possibilities, the same hopes, that California will give to him what California gave to Pete Wilson?

**PW:** Very good question, and that's the question that everyone who seeks and holds public office should ask himself or herself. And I think the answer is that we aren't going to know for a while.

**CC:** Last question. Did you get rich in politics?

**PW:** No, (laughs) I'm working on that now.

*In his second inaugural, on January 2, 1995, Pete Wilson, talked about Californians in general when he said the ceremony was a vindication of a resilient and sturdy people blessed with courage and character. Though tested and tempered in the forge of adversity, they came through the fire, their faith intact, clinging tenaciously to the promise of California.*

*He could have been talking about himself.*

## Side Story

Part way through his second term as governor, Pete Wilson made an ill-fated run for president. It was an uncomfortable time for the Wilsonites and, is perhaps, one of the few documented moments in which Bob White was not in agreement with his boss. Wilson had previously promised voters that he would serve out his full term as governor. His decision balanced the interest in his race nationwide with the hits he was going to take from editors and the opponents who said he'd broken his word.

The race immediately stumbled when he literally had his throat cut to remove a polyp which had developed on his vocal chords. The specialist advised him not to talk much on the phone, shouldn't talk in cars or on airplanes, and a stump speech was no more possible than leaping tall buildings.

His campaign also highlighted the difficulty of a sitting California governor, who needs to reach conclusion and come to resolution on major issues, being on the campaign trail.

The race ended when rumors of his health, including false cancer stories, dried up the money. Silenced by the surgery, Wilson was unable to compete.