

It began as a free-for-all, then settled into a two-man race. But the recall stayed a circus till the end.

BY KAREN BRESLAU

BY THE TIME IT WAS OVER, the Great California Recall of 2003, which began as a kind of amusing, exasperating freak show—"It's democracy at its best!" "No, it's politics at its worst!"—settled down to a more depressingly familiar spectacle: a nasty spitting match between two desperate pols that has nothing at all to do with the many problems facing the nation's most populous state.

Take a moment to review. With a few days to go before they would have to choose the person to lead them out of the tax crunch and the energy crunch and the jobs crunch and the housing crunch and the education crunch, here is what Californians heard from the "front runners." Gov. Gray Davis expressed deep disappointment that Arnold Schwarzenegger had been accused of groping countless women over the years and had, in his younger days, allegedly expressed his admiration for Adolf Hitler—and even mimicked a Nazi salute.

The groping charges broke in the Los Angeles Times, on the morning Schwarzenegger launched a charge on Sacramento aboard a bus emblazoned with a Mount Rushmore-size mural of his face. At first, aides tried to denounce the allegations. Within hours, though, the actor issued an apology—call it a "mea sorta culpa." He admitted that he had on occasion "behaved badly," while claiming, with great moral indignation, that "a lot" of the stories weren't true.

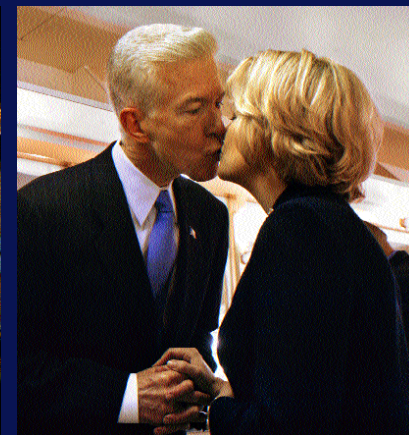
The second strike came in a New York Times story recounting an interview Arnold gave for the 1977 documentary "Pumping Iron." Asked to name his heroes,



Are We There Yet?



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GREATEST SHOW ON EARTH

Schwarzenegger reaches out to voters late last week; Arianna Huffington, with an aide, before dropping out to focus on blocking the actor; Davis gets a good luck kiss from his wife; Lt. Gov. Cruz Bustamante makes his rounds

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California

he allegedly responded, "I admired Hitler, for instance, because he came from being a little man with almost no formal education, up to power. And I admire him for being such a good public speaker." (He went on to say that he "didn't admire" the ends to which Hitler used his might, though that wasn't reported initially). The alleged comments were distributed in a 1997 book proposal by director George Butler. Later, with his wife, Maria Shriver, at his side, Schwarzenegger said he "cannot imagine" making such comments "because I have always despised everything Hitler stands for."

Arnold claimed he was the victim of a smear, and accused his enemies of running "a puke campaign" against him. Davis, renowned for his willingness to play down and dirty to pull out a win, angrily denied any involvement in the stories. He called the charges against Schwarzenegger a "shock to the public conscience." But in post-recall California, there isn't much that seems shocking anymore. ■



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