

# Gavin Newsom, the Next Head of the California Resistance

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By Tad Friend

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The grin. The slow clap. The grin, the slow clap, and the brisk hand rub. Gavin Newsom, California's leading candidate for governor, paced a crowded Teamsters hall in Fresno, manifesting his delight at being among real people for a real talk at last. The pageantry also gave him time to read the crowd—hundreds of expectant faces, citizens of a Central Valley checkered by alfalfa fields and raisin-processing facilities and half-abandoned downtowns—and suss out what they wanted to hear. Town halls are Newsom's favorite way to campaign; this one, in early June, was his thirty-fifth of the electoral season. A former baseball standout once recruited by the Texas Rangers, he views town halls as spring training for the rigors of governing.

It was four days before the "jungle primary," a multiparty free-for-all that would advance two gubernatorial candidates from a field of twenty-seven to the general election, in November. Newsom, the state's lieutenant governor, was far ahead in the polls, and, if his position held, he would come into office with a budget surplus of nearly nine billion dollars. But, like many Democratic politicians in the Donald Trump era, he was trying to harness not only the alarm of moderates and the rage of progressives but the almost universal yearning for a new politics entirely. He sought a platform that would exemplify the slogan—"Courage for a Change"—blazoned across his campaign bus: a platform that was risky and inspiring, yet at the same time sensible and inclusive and grounded in the lunch-pail realities of daily life. But what platform, exactly? And would anyone really believe he could make it happen?

His visuals are certainly unassailable. Tall and lithe and still boyish at fifty-one, with teeth that Tom Cruise would envy and hair lacquered with Oribe gel, Newsom—who as the mayor of San Francisco was known as Mayor McHottie—is easy on the eyes. His wife, Jennifer Siebel Newsom, a documentary filmmaker and a former actress who for a time dated George Clooney, was alarmed by the hunger that Newsom can evoke. She said, "I can't tell you how many women and gay men would tell me, when I started dating him, 'I want him!'" In Fresno, he sported his trademark look: a white Ermenegildo Zegna shirt with the sleeves rolled up and a blue Tom Ford tie. It was also his hero Bobby Kennedy's look—the Bobby Kennedy who visited Cesar Chavez in the Central Valley fifty years ago, when America was breaking apart over Vietnam. Newsom seeks to embody Kennedy's grainy glamour, to provide moral clarity in a bewildering hour.

If R.F.K. came across as a bare-knuckle fighter converted to humility, Newsom presents an image that an adviser describes as "pretty boy with a slide rule." The back of his state-issued S.U.V. is stacked with notebooks filled with ideas and data culled from books and articles and conversations with nearly four hundred experts; it's a kind of rolling athenaeum. Severely dyslexic as a child, he learned to learn by copying key passages in his left-handed scrawl and reading them aloud. He gradually compresses each of the topics he follows into a one-sheet of facts that salt his talks: *Fourteen per cent of low-income families' after-tax income goes to diapers! Eighty-five per cent of brain growth happens in the first three years!* His campaign manager, Addisu Demissie, who has also helped to run campaigns for Cory Booker and Hillary Clinton, told me, "Gavin is by far the most knowledgeable candidate I've ever worked with." Newsom lacks the God-given gifts of, say, Eric Garcetti, the Los Angeles mayor who dazzled voters as a break-dancing Rhodes Scholar. But, he told me, "I will outwork you. I will read more, I will think more, I will reflect more. I just will."

Although Newsom is prepared to answer any question, he sometimes has trouble answering *your* question. When asked to name the biggest issue facing Fresno, Newsom spoke rapidly, in his hoarsely resonant baritone. "Affordability," he said. "I mean, it's *the* issue—cost of living, housing, it's the No. 1 issue, issues of childcare for your family, issues of education, cost of education, *access*." The way he punches certain words gives his speech the inexhaustible quality of a sea chantey. "And the perennial issue—I was just down in Bakersfield—the issue of air quality, issue of health, and the unique health *disparities* that exist out there, the issues of primary-care physicians, access to quality care, affordability of quality health care, all those issues have to be tackled. And, with all due respect, while our economy is growing—4.2-per-cent unemployment rate, twenty-four consecutive months of job creation—people don't live in the aggregate, not everybody's *feeling* that recovery, and we've got to deal with the issue of income and wealth disparity." There was more, until he concluded, "And so I feel very, very passionately about those issues."

Like the state he hopes to govern, Newsom evokes an endless wave rather than a fixed locale. Eric Garcetti said, "Gavin is future-facing, like California. He's almost from central casting. Like a tech entrepreneur, he'll test ideas and fail forward—he'll adapt to whatever happens." Newsom's approach to policy is self-avowedly entrepreneurial and bold. A longtime California



political observer said, “There’s always a narrative of great moral challenge that Gavin Newsom single-handedly rises to while all around him cower.”

Newsom reminded the crowd in the Teamsters hall of the “proof points” of his audacity: his leadership in legalizing cannabis use in the state; his introduction of universal access to health care in San Francisco; and, particularly, his decision, in 2004, to ignore the law and permit the city’s same-sex couples to marry. He skipped over the wayward, muddled period of his mayoralty when he drank too much and had an affair with his appointments secretary.

From the start of his first term as an executive, Newsom apprehensively called himself “the future ex-mayor of San Francisco.” He says that it was a reminder not to fall in love with the role, because “people don’t give a damn. They forget you.” Actually, he’s almost too memorable. Despite all his policy-paper annotating, Newsom, who built a fortune on a consortium of hospitality businesses, has the air of a man who just sauntered off a yacht. He married Jennifer Siebel, in 2008, at an “Out of Africa”-themed wedding, attended by San Francisco and Silicon Valley’s elite, including Sergey Brin, George Shultz, Charles Schwab, and Gordon and Ann Getty—who a decade earlier had thrown Newsom’s “Great Gatsby”-themed thirtieth-birthday party. Voters still have trouble believing that a man so palpably blessed could feel their pain.

After forty minutes in Fresno, Newsom knew that he hadn’t yet made the crowd believe it. When Elizabeth Howard, an eight-year-old African-American with pink and white ribbons in her hair, said she was worried that there would be a shooting at her school, Newsom reminded the audience that, in 2017, he took on the National Rifle Association and got voters to pass Prop. 63, which implements a background check on everyone who buys ammunition. Then he turned back to Elizabeth and knelt before her. At such moments, his voice slows and gravels up. “When you go to school, the last thing you should be thinking about is guns,” he said. “I promise you you’ll be safe in school and able to learn.” The applause, long pending, broke at last.

In the civil war against Donald Trump, Newsom casts himself as Abe Lincoln. He says that California’s gubernatorial election will anoint “the next head of the resistance.” Much of Newsom’s Twitter feed, which has 1.4 million followers, is devoted to calling out the President, disputing him on issues and labelling him “a small, scared bully” and “a pathetic disgrace.” On the stump, Newsom points out that the “nation-state” of California is larger than a hundred and thirty-seven countries and has the fifth-largest economy on the planet. “The world is looking to us for leadership,” he often says.

Video From The New Yorker

Babybangz: Black Power in Hair

California seems like a natural home for the resistance. The day after Trump was elected, the leaders of the State Senate and the State Assembly jointly declared, “California was not a part of this nation when its history began, but we are clearly now the keeper of its future.” The state has sued the Trump Administration forty-four times, on matters ranging from *DACA* to health care to the census. As the White House abandons environmental protections, California is suing to maintain its historic right to set its own air-quality standards, and it passed a law mandating that all its electricity come from carbon-free sources by 2045. It also resisted the new federal income-tax laws, established its own form of net neutrality, and declared itself a sanctuary state.

Yet the state that gave birth to the counterculture, in 1967, gave us the Reagan revolution the same year. Across the decades, California has led the nation’s judder to the right with three populist ballot initiatives: Prop. 13, which capped property taxes; Prop. 184, a widely imitated three-strikes law; and Prop. 187, which denied state services to undocumented immigrants. What’s more, by electing Arnold Schwarzenegger governor, in 2003, the state normalized the idea of installing a bombastic and untried entertainer in office. And, while California boasts Hollywood and Silicon Valley, it also has the nation’s highest poverty rate and nearly half the country’s homeless population.

So there are plenty of reasons for the state’s nationally ambitious politicians to look after local concerns. Governor Jerry Brown, who has served four terms in the job since 1975 and is widely admired for his recent work to refill the state’s empty coffers, told me, “Do people really believe that ‘all your problems are Trump’? It’s too abstract—it’s not road repair, tuition, health care, crime. It can rub people the wrong way.”

“I disagree,” Newsom said. “You gotta go after a bully.” In September, when Trump joked about moving to California because it has free health care (it doesn’t, but Newsom hopes to institute a single-payer program), Newsom tweeted back, “Next time you call me and my policies out, have the guts to @ me and we can have a chat.” He takes Trump’s jabs at California



personally, because he takes nearly everything personally. SCN Strategies, a leading political-consulting firm in San Francisco, used to train its candidates how not to deal with the media by showing them Newsom's tantrums when challenged by television reporters: the petulant silences and huffy diatribes. ("Off the record, I'm amazingly disappointed, amazingly!") SCN doesn't show that footage around these days, because it's now advising Newsom himself on what not to do.

When Newsom can't defuse a challenge, he sometimes gets sulky. This spring, a group of billionaires who favor charter schools began funding a PAC supporting Newsom's chief Democratic rival, the former Los Angeles mayor Antonio Villaraigosa. The PAC raised and spent more than twenty-two million dollars; Michael Bloomberg and Eli Broad, former Newsom allies, donated five million between them. Newsom immediately wrote off both men: "They clearly do not want to have a relationship anymore." He was a little less brusque with Reed Hastings, the Netflix C.E.O., who'd given seven million. Hastings told me he explained to Newsom that "it wasn't an anti-Gavin thing—it was just that I had a great relationship with Antonio." Newsom said, "We had this strange conversation where I told Reed, 'I thought you guys would only put in ten million'—I really thought five—and he said, 'I'm only putting in half of what I otherwise would, because it's *you*.'" Newsom snorted. "With all due respect to Antonio, it's demonstrated they can't win by building him up, so they have to tear me down. If they can knock me down three or four points and come in second, then they're validated. And then they could put in a hundred million dollars in the general, easy—*easy!*" He told me, somewhat implausibly, that he hadn't seen the attack ads the PAC was airing: "Is it the arrogant-jerk, slicked-hair thing? Yeah, I get it." He grimaced at the unfairness. Newsom—the clear leader in the race, a multimillionaire who had already raised thirty-two million dollars—was casting himself as an upstart being steamrolled by the moneyed elite.

"Privately," he continued, "I've developed a *real* animus against private wealth. Wow, just because you made a lot of money, you can buy anything you want, including a candidate? If it's me and Antonio in the general, there could be a real evolution in me, where I come out a very different person expressing outrage against a system stacked against him. It's a new muscle I'm developing. You may be talking to Bernie Sanders in six months."

After a day of meetings, Newsom returned, with evident pleasure, to his house high on a hill in Kentfield, north of San Francisco. It's modern, tasteful, and secluded. On our way, he'd joked, preemptively, about how I was likely to draw a lazy inference from the Tesla in his driveway. Actually, there were three.

In his home office, Newsom pointed to his clutter-free desk and said, "I eat here and work here and watch MSNBC here. And I always check Tucker Carlson on Fox, to see how far he's going on the racism spectrum." Histories of Bobby Kennedy and his era filled the bookshelves, and three R.F.K. photographs adorned the walls. In one, from 1968, Kennedy was stumping with Newsom's father, Bill, who was running for the State Senate. Kennedy was assassinated a week later, and Bill Newsom lost that fall. "I get that you shouldn't run on nostalgia, that the branding should be 'Represent tomorrow,'" Newsom said. "But I'm too in love with the optimism of those years. This picture of Bobby Kennedy crouching to talk to a kid in the Central Valley—this hardheaded guy nobody particularly loved, whose journey made him a different man? That's *everything*."

John Avalos, a former member of the San Francisco Board of Supervisors, supports Newsom's campaign but is troubled by his rhetorical use of Kennedy. "It wasn't R.F.K. who made 1968 so great," Avalos said. "It was the huge people's movement around the world that brought R.F.K. forward and gave him energy. Gavin's vision is 'What I'm going to do—not *with* people but *for* them.'" Newsom doesn't relish the rote functions of politics. His smile when he poses with voters is a rictus, he ducks fund-raising calls, and he lacks patience for the backroom hugger-mugger required to pass legislation. Tom Ammann, a board member who initiated a health-care plan that Newsom later made his own, said, "There were members of the board who woke up every morning wanting to fuck Gavin Newsom over."

Muttering about the housekeeper, Newsom angled two chairs together. His cousin Jeremy Scherer had told me, "Gavin's such a fanatic about detail that I don't think I've ever seen a lit candle at his house. Once you light a candle, it looks used." Newsom realigned an arrowhead on a shelf, then grinned sheepishly. "I've got some issues," he said.

We moved into the living room, where his wife embraced him. Siebel Newsom—warm, telegenic, and fluent in Spanish—is a potent asset on the campaign trail. Her belief in him at least equals his own, and she is quicker to discuss the possibility of a President Newsom.

She lowered her voice and told Newsom that Hunter, their seven-year-old, "had his first bad experience with older boys today. They put poop on his head."



“Well, welcome to life, buddy.”

Their four children tumbled into the room, and then their white Labrador, Max, raced in noisily from the kitchen. Newsom stood and commanded, “No barking, bud!” Max, still barking, bounded into my lap, and the children hooted and ran to pet him. Siebel Newsom, murmuring to her children in Spanish and to Max in alpha tones, restored order.

Newsom turned to his nine-year-old daughter, Montana, and said, “Tad’s going to ask you, ‘Do you like Daddy’s hair with hair gel or no hair gel?’”

“No hair gel,” she said. Newsom spread his arms and threw his head back—*a guy can’t win*.

After the children ran off, I brought up a perplexing issue: for someone as personable as Newsom is, he doesn’t seem to have many intimates. His habit of prefacing disclosures with “Literally,” “Candidly,” or “Swear to God” suggests a man accustomed to striving for familiarity. I wrote about Newsom for this magazine in 2004, and noticed a certain insularity then, too; his wife at the time, Kimberly Guilfoyle, told me, “If San Francisco were a woman, he would have married her.” (In what is perhaps a form of long-simmering revenge, she is now dating Donald Trump, Jr.) Katherine Munson, a childhood friend of Newsom’s, recently told me, “Gavin is always around pretty people. But he doesn’t seem to have many real friends.”

Newsom turned to his wife: “We have a lot of great friends, right? We have a good circle?” She nodded reassuringly. “Total strangers, walking the street with them, I’m very comfortable,” he continued, half to himself. Siebel Newsom glanced at me. She’d told me that Newsom’s childhood, when he was bullied and felt conspicuous—he had a lisp, a bowl haircut, and braces on his legs from a growth spurt—made him mistrust being sought out now. “Going from that to being treated like a god made him very uncomfortable,” she said.

When Newsom was two, his parents separated, and he and his younger sister lived with their mother, Tessa, who worked three jobs and took in foster children to help pay the rent. Bill Newsom—who had gone to high school with Gordon Getty and who administered the Getty trusts—occasionally swooped in to take Gavin on vacation with the Getty family: polar-bear watching in Hudson Bay, safaris in Africa. When he returned from these jaunts, his mother would say, “Hope you had *fun!*” and storm off to bed. “The *guilt*,” he told me. “She made me feel horrible.”

One night, Newsom recalled hearing “my mother yelling and screaming at my dad because he wasn’t able to help us financially, because he was very close to bankruptcy. He didn’t care about money, but I *never* wanted to be in that position.” Jeremy Scherer said, “Gavin’s mother’s struggles motivated him to be more successful in politics than his father was—and to *show* him he could be more successful.”

In middle school, Newsom, drawing inspiration from “Rocky,” took up boxing and drank raw eggs to toughen himself. Then he began applying hair gel and wearing blazers and business suits, a costume inspired by “Remington Steele,” the TV show that starred Pierce Brosnan as a con man who assumes the identity of a glamorous private detective. “The suit was literally a mask,” he said. “I am still that anxious kid with the bowl-cut hair, the dyslexic kid—the rest is a façade. The only thing that saved me was sports.” In high school, as a baseball and basketball star, Newsom began to see himself as an underdog with a responsibility for other underdogs. His friend and teammate Derek Smith told me, “Gavin was the guy who stood up and made sure no harm came to us.”

In 1992, after graduating from Santa Clara University, Newsom went into business with Gordon Getty’s son Billy, opening PlumpJack Wine & Spirits in San Francisco. Then Newsom launched the Balboa Café, which became a gathering place for the city’s young heirs, scions of families like the Fishers and the Pritzkers, who in turn became his early political patrons. Gordon Getty, a minority investor in those businesses, invested more heavily as Newsom kept expanding, and owned forty-nine per cent of the PlumpJack Group by the time Newsom ran for mayor in 2003. Getty also underwrote the mortgage for Newsom’s first home; as he once told me, he thought of Newsom as a son. Newsom acknowledges that the help was invaluable but insists that it was his own farsightedness and hard work that made PlumpJack grow. After becoming mayor, he turned control of the business over to his sister, Hilary, and to Jeremy Scherer. It now comprises eighteen restaurants, wineries, hotels, and the like, and Newsom’s share of its profits is some \$1.5 million a year.

Advertisement



Newsom prefers to emphasize his childhood's Cinderella struggles, because the rescue-by-fairy-godmother aspect gets used against him. One gubernatorial rival called him a "Davos Democrat"; another's PAC labelled him "Fortunate \$on." "It's not exactly that Gavin is jealous that he doesn't have a swam-over-the-Rio-Grande background," one of his advisers said, "but he does want an underdog story." Siebel Newsom, who argues that "the perception of Prince Gavin is all wrong," asked SCN Strategies to focus its ad campaign on the hardscrabble years. But those spots tested poorly, as SCN had predicted they would, and the campaign ended up being about Newsom's courage.

As the Newsoms ate cheese and crackers, he teasingly brought up her plan for the ads, and she got indignant: "I said, 'People have to know who he really is.' And Sean Clegg"—a partner at SCN—"said, 'People don't *care* who he really is.'" She looked to her husband for support.

"That's the problem," he said. "Sean knows what he's doing."

On the bus after events, Newsom appraises his performance at length, sometimes aloud. An undone shirt button made him look like a "jerk," he'd garbled his point about rent control, or, often, he'd been too diffuse: "My biggest threat to being a successful governor is my profound incapacity to distill what I want to accomplish into one or two issues."

He kept feeling that he was failing to connect on the biggest topic: job automation. One study has estimated that by 2030 the "robocalypse" will erase eight hundred million jobs. Newsom, gesturing at his staff, told me, "These guys said, 'Enough with the future-of-work riffs, with *the robots are coming*.' I was spending too much time with the Elons of the world"—Elon Musk—"and I was just scaring people. If you're going to identify a problem, at least express optimism about finding a solution. When I get into the remedy of doing transformation maps in each industry, and layering over a skills map, when I talk about nanodegrees and upscaling, well, *I've lost every single person*. Trump trounced on this issue, completely lying and telling them the old manufacturing economy was coming back: 'I'm going to protect your job and it's O.K.'"

Maybe the answer lay in the tapes. As a young man, Newsom made VHS tapes of three subjects and studied them obsessively: the smooth lefty swing of the Giants' first baseman Will Clark; episodes of "Remington Steele"; and every speech by Bill Clinton. When Newsom was mayor, his staff always knew when he'd been studying Clinton, because he'd speak with an Arkansas twang. He still employs Clinton mannerisms on the stump: the bit lip of empathy, the genial head toggle as he adjudicates, the drill-sergeant jaw pop before he wades in. Yet one official who knows both men suggested that their affects differ: "Bill Clinton peers deeply into your soul. Gavin peers deeply into the mirror at himself."

Newsom told me he wanted to personalize the robocalypse the way Clinton personalized the economy in a town-hall-style debate in the 1992 campaign. Newsom, a gifted mimic, slid into a husky Clinton voice as he recited the exchange: after George H. W. Bush seemed baffled by a question about how economic anxieties had personally affected him, Clinton approached Bush's interlocutor and asked her name. "I'll tell you how it's affected me," he said. "In my state, when people lose their jobs, there's a good chance I'll know 'em by their names. When a factory closes, I know the people who ran it." Newsom shook his head admiringly: "I know everybody in my state, *I know their names*'—I mean, come on, that's impossible! But that moment was, like, Whoa, what just happened? I fell in love with politics then."

Jerry Brown told me that Newsom's persona, "lively and attractive and on the move," appealed to voters' periodic wish for political renewal. A mandarin figure, Brown prides himself on mentoring no one. Nonetheless, Newsom spent months trying to gain his endorsement before the primary. Newsom has known Brown his whole life: his grandfather was a campaign manager for Brown's father, Pat, a two-term California governor, and Brown appointed Bill Newsom to the state Court of Appeals. For the past eight years, Newsom's office has been twenty yards from Brown's. Yet Brown wouldn't engage. "Most politicians are mostly interested in themselves," he told me. "Think of racehorses running around the track. One may look back to see if the others are gaining, but it's a fairly individualistic pursuit." He kept telling Newsom that he didn't need the endorsement, that he was going to win anyway. Or maybe he wouldn't, in which case, why should he give it?

Newsom finally said, "I don't want your endorsement politically, I want it personally."

"It's all politics, Gavin," Brown replied, coolly.

"Not for me!" Newsom declared.



Afterward, Newsom told me, “I am laudatory everywhere I go, and that’s what Jerry expects, and he is not laudatory everywhere he goes, and that’s what I expect.” He laughed. “And that is actually a pretty good relationship with Jerry Brown.”

Newsom strode through throngs of homeless people camped on Ellis Street in San Francisco’s Tenderloin district, calling out, “How you doing, brother?” and “Nice to see you, Ma’am.” He stopped periodically to listen to Odyssean histories, offer tips on navigating the system, and turn down a repeatedly proffered beer—“I try not to do it in the middle of the day, to control myself, brother.”

As mayor, Newsom often toured the Tenderloin unannounced to see what was really happening. He’d been elected in 2003 owing to the popularity of a ballot measure called “Care Not Cash,” which he’d sponsored the previous year. The resulting program greatly reduced direct payments to the homeless and used the money to provide them with housing and services. Brown, who was then the mayor of Oakland, told me that he studied the program to see if it was worth emulating. “It was *something*,” he allowed, “but, as with so many things in government, you have these slogans, and then what really happens? We still have a lot of homelessness in San Francisco, right?”

Although the city secured housing for twelve thousand people during Newsom’s administration, its streets are far denser with tents and shopping carts than they were in 2003. As Newsom smiled and thumbs-upped, he muttered, “There’s no statewide policy, no timeline, no goals, no strategy—no one gives a damn! You wonder if you had any impact.”

Outside the Quick-Stop Liquor Store, a young African-American man holding an orange hairbrush approached Newsom: “What you going to do for us?”

“What do you need?”

“More houses for us, not white-people houses.” The man, who gave his name as Quan, said he lived in the Alice Griffith housing project.

“Double Rock!” Newsom cried, using the project’s nickname. “You going to college?”

“Why should I?”

Newsom laughed. “You want me to *literally* answer that damn question? I can tell by your physiology you already know the answer.” His voice was stern, the tough-love headmaster. As Quan angled away, laughing, Newsom pursued him, saying, “Community college! Forty-six bucks a unit! And we can waive that—”

“What if I got a felony?” Quan cried, raising his arms as if in surrender.

“All right, we gotta work on that!” Newsom called. “If it’s drug-related, we can waive that, too, after Prop. 47!” But Quan was gone.

Newsom squinted at the surroundings and said, “All this in the shadow of the Salesforce Tower”—the city’s tallest building, whose anchor tenant is Salesforce, the cloud-computing company run by his friend Marc Benioff. Over the years, as Newsom has grappled with the intractability of poverty and racism, he has become more progressive on such issues as cash bail, sentencing reform, and California’s status as a sanctuary state. As governor, he plans to appoint a homelessness tsar, to preempt the problem of homeless people congregating in cities with more services—cities such as San Francisco. But he’s not sure that will work, either.

As we walked by a soup kitchen called St. Anthony’s Dining Room, I mentioned that his former campaign manager Jim Ross had told me that, one winter night in 2002, Newsom drove to a discount clothing shop, bought a couple of thousand dollars’ worth of socks and underwear, and delivered it to St. Anthony’s. Newsom nodded ruefully. “Sometimes,” he said, “you get so frustrated you just have to do something directly.”

Newsom’s mayoralty was defined by a similarly impulsive decision on gay marriage. Three weeks into the job, he heard President George W. Bush propose a constitutional amendment to preserve “the sanctity of marriage” and thought, *He’s attacking my citizens!* Two weeks later, he directed the city clerk to approve same-sex marriages. Newsom’s family, his staff,



and every Democratic official he'd consulted advised him not to do it. Nancy Pelosi, the Minority Leader of the House of Representatives, said, "I told Gavin, 'We all share this value—but is this the right timing?' He said, 'This is about the *people* and what matters to them.'"

The result was a widely publicized "Winter of Love," in which four thousand and thirty-six same-sex couples got married. That summer, though, a court nullified the marriages, and Newsom found himself isolated. When Barack Obama came to San Francisco, he made sure that he wasn't photographed with Newsom. In November, after George Bush defeated John Kerry, Senator Dianne Feinstein blamed Newsom's initiative, saying, "That whole issue has been too much, too fast, too soon."

In 2008, California's Supreme Court struck down the law banning gay marriage, and an elated Newsom announced, "This door is wide open now! It's going to happen whether you like it or not!" Ads for Prop. 8, a ballot measure to amend the state constitution to prohibit gay marriage, used that video clip to devastating effect. Newsom knew that he'd spiked the ball on the five-yard line: "A politician saying 'Whether you like it or not'—that doesn't feel like democracy." After Prop. 8 passed, *Newsweek* wrote, "Newsom has become a joke to Democratic insiders, a man whose bright national future ended before it began."

Only in 2013, when the Supreme Court upheld the equality of same-sex marriage, was he vindicated. Newsom told me that he remained proud of his original act of civil disobedience. But, he added, "so many of my political heroes read me the riot act. And, look, for a lot of years there was a lot of evidence that they were right." He sighed. "I don't know if I'd have the guts to do it again. Because back then I didn't know what I didn't know—I had a beginner's mind."

On primary night, Newsom, his wife, and twelve members of his team huddled in a low-ceilinged room upstairs at Verso, a San Francisco night club owned by PlumpJack, while his supporters drank downstairs. Newsom's strategy had been to single out his opponent John Cox, a Republican businessman whom Donald Trump had endorsed in a tweet. Newsom ran ads attacking Cox—which were actually intended to improve Cox's standing among conservatives, so that he'd come in second, ahead of Antonio Villaraigosa. Other Democrats in the race called Newsom selfish; two Democrats atop the ballot would increase Democratic turnout in the fall and lift the Party's candidates in tight congressional races. But he was desperate to avoid going head to head with Villaraigosa and his charter-school PAC of billionaires.

As the polls closed, Newsom sat with his fingers steeped. "What are the new numbers?" he asked.

Daniel Lopez, his political director, peered at his computer. "Which county?"

"*Over all*," Newsom said. Silence. "I'm going to start drinking!"

Lopez looked up at last: "It's all still coming in—but we're winning L.A. County." Los Angeles is Villaraigosa's home turf. "Thirty-two for us, twenty-one for Cox, eighteen for Antonio."

"Jesus Christ!" Newsom said, relieved.

"It was the ads," Sean Clegg suggested, dryly. Siebel Newsom made a face: touché. Minutes later, CNN called the race—Newsom and Cox would advance. Villaraigosa, who finished a distant third, later told me that Newsom's cutthroat strategy was the smart play: "I told Gavin, 'I'd have done the same thing.'"

Newsom showed his phone to a staffer and said, "Classic!" Texts were already streaming in from people wanting to host fundraisers. When Reed Hastings texted congratulations ("You are a star! If you'll still have me, I'd be honored to support you"), Newsom responded with an olive branch ("Honored!!"). Hastings promptly donated the maximum, twenty-nine thousand five hundred dollars.

Though the champagne was flowing, there was an air of anticlimax. What now? Newsom trudged downstairs and delivered a stock address about the glories of California, "a state where we don't obstruct justice, we demand justice for everybody; where we don't regulate women's bodies more than we regulate assault weapons out on our streets." Conspicuously missing, on the night when Newsom effectively became the next governor, was a clear signal of what exactly he hoped to do. "We haven't been able to attach a narrative around the campaign," he told me. "I feel I've let people down on that. It's all these *pieces*—we're just reacting."



Two months later, he said that he was still searching. “Everybody threw back at me, ‘We do have a narrative! It’s ‘Courage for a Change.’” Courage is the brand, it’s what I’ve sold—not *sold*, exactly,” he clarified. “But I feel we need something more.” Why not embrace your shift to the left, the way Bobby Kennedy did? Especially as progressives have captured the Party’s energy? He nodded and said, “I started out in the middle and I’ve moved . . .” He caught himself. “I don’t know if more to the left. The more educated I become, the more I become a social-justice warrior about systemic racism. But I’m still a passionate free-enterprise Democrat. And I’m like Jerry—you’ve got to balance budgets, too.” He pointed, putting the world on notice: “That’s going to disappoint a *lot* of people.” From the rubble of an admission that he lacked a narrative, Newsom rescued the one narrative that had always consoled him: courage.

When his wife wandered to the back of the campaign bus, Newsom informed her that he’d just been telling me how they’ve begun to meditate.

“The way we’re going to calm our nation and soothe all our aggression is this,” Siebel Newsom said. “Leading with love and positivity.” He made a face. “It’s California—you can get away with it!” she said.

“I don’t think you can,” he said. “That’s why this whole thing has been under wraps.” He was kidding, sort of. Newsom was inspired to try meditation by observing its effect on achievers such as Kobe Bryant and Marc Benioff, who teaches the practice. Benioff told me, “After Gavin went through his crisis, I think he was looking for a lot of things to shift in himself. What you see today is Gavin 2.0.”

The crisis was Newsom’s acknowledgment, in February, 2007, that two years earlier he’d had an affair with his appointments secretary, Ruby Rippey-Tourk, the wife of his deputy chief of staff and good friend Alex Tourk. In a sombre public statement, Newsom said, “The affair is something I have to live with, and something that I am deeply sorry for.” He later announced that he would seek counselling for alcohol abuse. The period after his marriage broke up had got messy. He brought a nineteen-year-old girlfriend to an event where she was seen drinking wine; he showed up tipsy one night for a hospital visit to a mortally wounded police officer; and, when Rippey-Tourk went on sick leave to address her own alcohol abuse, the city, in an apparent exception to its procedures, paid her more than ten thousand dollars under a catastrophic-illness program.

In the #MeToo era, voters might have judged Newsom more harshly. But he was reelected that fall with seventy-four per cent of the vote. Still, Newsom told me that he’d been “humbled in a profound way, humiliated and embarrassed.” He went on to say that he wouldn’t be on the verge of becoming governor if he hadn’t made those mistakes: “There’s more to me now. I’m more empathetic, I have a sense of gratitude, and I don’t judge like I used to judge—including the guy in the White House.” But, even as he cast his tribulations as a part of the hero’s arc, he avoided detailing why they had happened. When I pushed, he obscured himself in a cloud of bullet points: “Personal journey, renewal, turning the page.”

His counsellor was Mimi Silbert, who runs a rehab center called the Delancey Street Foundation. They met daily at first, and then more sporadically across four years. The first thing Silbert did was to tell him to stop drinking. (Two years later, having decided he wasn’t an alcoholic, she gave him permission to drink socially.) “I have two speeds, on and off,” Newsom told me he’d explained. “I said to Mimi, ‘When I have a drink, that’s my moment when I turn off. It’s *my* time.’ And she said, ‘You’re still the fucking mayor!’ I had never thought of that.”

Silbert told me, “I would be trying to get at the feelings, but emotions were not Gavin’s strong suit. He gets excited by ideas, by having achieved thirty-seven per cent of his goals. And in that period there was no policy pathway out. He was just sad and lonely and he drank too much.”

Haltingly, Newsom began to tell Silbert about the residue of his childhood. His mother had tried to read with him, but it didn’t go well. Newsom’s daughter Montana is dyslexic and, he said, “I tell Jen, ‘Don’t make me read with her!’ Because when she’s struggling with the words my daughter is me and I’m my mother, and it’s too hard.” His mother grew so concerned by his torment over homework that she told him, “It’s O.K. to be average.” Bristling at the memory, Newsom told me, “I said, ‘No! That’s not going to work for me!’ That may have been the most damaging thing she ever said to me. It gave me all my drive. I hate her for it—but I love her for it.”

He overcorrected. Newsom’s sister, Hilary, said that when their mother had breast cancer, in her fifties, he was difficult to reach. “Gavin had trouble explaining to me how hard for him it was to be with her when she was dying, and I had trouble explaining to him how much I needed him,” she said. “Back then, he seemed like the kind of guy who would never change a



diaper.”

In May, 2002, his mother decided to end her life through assisted suicide. Newsom recalled, “She left me a message, because I was too busy: ‘Hope you’re well. Next Wednesday will be the last day for me. Hope you can make it.’ I saved the cassette with the message on it, that’s how sick I am.” He crossed his arms and jammed his hands into his armpits. “I have P.T.S.D., and this is bringing it all back,” he said. “The night before we gave her the drugs, I cooked her dinner, hard-boiled eggs, and she told me, ‘Get out of politics.’ She was worried about the stress on me.”

Seven years later, Newsom made his first run for governor. The plan was to preempt Jerry Brown, then the state’s attorney general. But Brown announced a few months later, and Newsom knew he was finished. Still, he said, “I didn’t have the guts to get out for another six weeks. I was playacting. *Undeserving* was the point—Jerry was the better candidate.”

Afraid that if he got out of politics he’d never get back in, he ran for lieutenant governor, a job he’d disparaged as “a largely ceremonial post.” He spent a year and a half trying to establish his authority, as the chair of a state commission for economic development, but Brown refused to appoint enough members for the commission to meet. “He was very dismissive of me in the first term,” Newsom said. “He literally didn’t say a word to me.” Brown took issue with this characterization, telling me, “I spoke to him as much as I spoke to Mervyn Dymally”—the long-forgotten lieutenant governor in Brown’s first term, in the seventies, a man so tainted by stories of corruption that he was voted out.

Newsom avoided the capitol, in Sacramento, instead taking a desk at a work space for startups in San Francisco. He wrote a book called “Citizenville,” a techno-utopian vision of how to transform government. And, in his second term, he promoted ballot measures legalizing marijuana and instituting background checks on purchasers of ammunition. After Brown had enforced sufficient deference, he unbent a bit. Siebel Newsom said, “Gavin would come back and say, ‘Jerry showed me around the governor’s mansion!’ So there have been scraps thrown.”

The political consultant Ace Smith, who has worked on most of Newsom’s campaigns, said, “Gavin’s disastrous 2009 campaign for governor, and then having to suck up his pride and go for lieutenant governor—getting knocked on his ass—made him a lot more humble.” His happy second marriage and growing family also aided in a quiet transformation. Still, the hair gel. “I see that person, too, the tall, slick guy with the suits,” Newsom suddenly announced one afternoon, as his S.U.V. roared down the highway. “The image is self-inflicted. I didn’t set out to create it, and when I worked at the wine store I wore ripped jeans and had my hat backward, but when I became a sommelier at the café I put the suits back on and played that part: ‘Wonderful to see you again, Mr. Smith. We have a delightful Chardonnay tonight.’ And then politics reinforced it.”

He longs to merge his personas: “There’s a blended version, where I’m *on* but I’m not putting on the mask. I am so tempted to do an event with a hat and jeans and a T-shirt. But at the last minute I have vivid images of politicians who put on cowboy boots and Wranglers, still with a crease on them, to walk into the Dairy Queen. And when Obama wore the mom jeans to throw out that first pitch?” He was recalling the debacle of the 2009 All-Star Game. “I just can’t forget that.”

With Villaraigosa out of the race, Newsom finally secured Jerry Brown’s endorsement, and by August he had a twenty-two-point lead over Cox. He decided to dedicate his September bus tour to supporting Democrats in six tight congressional races, hoping to help the Party win control of the House. Rather than attacking Cox any further, he would run ads that simply announced his plans. He polled prospective voters about seven issues, trying to determine whether they saw the state’s problems through a lens of poverty or of education. Poverty won, but Newsom nonetheless authorized ads about education. “Education is economic opportunity is access to jobs *and* affordability!” he told me. “All the dots connect! And we’ll extend that to a college narrative—we’re going to add a second free year of community college. So the frame is really the California Dream, how it’s in peril with infrastructure and homelessness. It’s a positive frame, it’s not the anti-Trump frame, which would be our lazy campaign—though we can go there if we have to.” (As the election neared, they did.)

In September, he sent me a long text after a breakfast with the Reverend James Lawson, a civil-rights leader who met with Bobby Kennedy. He wrote that Lawson “hit me hard saying what was missing was ‘a sense of urgency’ a declaration to a ‘cause’ . . . ‘passion’ / ‘vision.’” He made Newsom realize that “this campaign is not about a campaign for governor, resplendent w dozens of policy ideas,” but is a crusade to address “poverty, particularly childhood poverty.”



Lawson, he told me, had provided the narrative he'd been seeking. As Newsom put it in his subsequent ads, urging prenatal nurse visits and pre-kindergarten for all, "Renewing the California Dream? It starts with ending child poverty." More important, Lawson had reminded him what it was all about: "He asked me—it was almost spiritual—what my purpose in life was: 'Why are you here?'" The question hit Newsom so hard that he couldn't muster an answer.

Late one afternoon, Newsom went to San Francisco's City Hall to meet with the new mayor, London Breed. Breed, the first African-American woman to hold the post, was focussed on homelessness, and she, too, liked to gauge the city's efforts by walking the streets unannounced. The two officials were natural allies. Yet Newsom, sitting in the office where he had last made decisions of real consequence, appeared ill at ease. A television in the corner was live-streaming Breed's former colleagues on the Board of Supervisors. "You gotta be up here!" Newsom exclaimed, raising his arm. "You can't get sucked into that"—he dropped his arm to the floor.

Breed replied, "Because I had the TV on, I was able to stop them from cutting two hundred and fifty police officers out of my budget." As they discussed individual city employees, Newsom kept glancing at the TV. "I really, seriously am concerned that you are watching the Board of Supervisors," he finally declared. "Rise above!"

"I just have it on as background—"

"No! Shut it off!"

Breed, unruffled, resumed talking about a homeless encampment on Mission Street. "Eight people, and only two of them accepted our help," she said.

Newsom frowned, thinking of Quan, the young man with the orange hairbrush. "I wish—I wish you could have been there when we met one of those kids out in the Tenderloin," he said. Maybe together they could have brought Quan around. On the other hand, as his advisers kept reminding him, he wasn't about to be elected mayor of California. He, too, needed to rise above.

Newsom leaned in across his old desk and said, "I just want to warn you—it goes fast. Like *that*. You have no idea, but you're the future ex-mayor."

Breed's chief of staff, who'd come in to wind up the meeting, frowned and said, "She's got nine more years."

"No," Newsom said. "It goes so fast."

Outside the mayoral suite, he stood for a moment on the landing. "Candidly, listening to her was like listening to me," he said. "I remember those emotions." In 2004, Newsom had told me that he could easily step away after one term: "Politics is life-consuming, but it's not a life." When I reminded him of that, he replied, "It's become my identity." Newsom's cousin Jeremy Scherer told me, "What's enamoring to Gavin about politics is that it's impossible and you never win. There's always someone who hates you and says you're doing a terrible job."

Newsom gazed up into the building's marble dome. Did he get smaller, or did the problems get bigger? You enter politics to change lives, and you end up hoping just to save your own. "I always imagined what it would be like to leave this office," he said. "I thought it would be powerful, but the minute I swore in Ed Lee as the next mayor, literally seconds later, every reporter is running toward Ed Lee, every staffer is running toward him, and I remember walking down these stairs alone. Ed never called me, my staff didn't call me—nobody. All that energy, over in a *nanosecond*." He shivered, draped his jacket over his shoulder, and loped downstairs to the S.U.V. waiting to speed him on his way to being the future ex-governor of California. ♦