



Biography

California Rising: The Life and Times of Pat Brown

Ethan Rarick

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Pat Brown was the right man to serve as California governor (1959—1965) during the state’s period of both booming population and economic growth. His record of liberal activism led to a major expansion of the state’s higher education system, an embattled struggle over civil rights, and a network of dams that brought water from northern California to the barren south. The author demonstrates that he is well suited to chronicle Brown’s life and the politics of post-World War II California, having spent fifteen years covering California politics for the *Los Angeles Times* and the *San Francisco Chronicle*. Rarick conducted exhaustive research and many interviews for this first-rate political biography.

Born in 1905, Brown graduated from his hometown’s San Francisco Law School and served as the city’s district attorney and the state’s attorney general before being elected governor. He was a natural politician, notes the author: “For Pat there was nothing better than the gabiness and gossip of politics, the constant stream of people to meet and connect with.” In his first term, Brown won public praise for his environmental and education policies and for creating a Fair Employment Practice Commission to fight racial bias in job hiring. However, as Rarick argues, Brown lost public support because of his indecisiveness in the notorious Caryl Chessman trial and execution and his inept attempt to be nominated for president in 1960 as California’s favorite son candidate.

Brown was reelected by a comfortable margin in 1962 over an embittered Richard Nixon, but it was during his second term that events and the emergence of a vital conservative movement overtook him. The Free Speech Movement that roiled Berkeley led to a public backlash. In 1965, the following year, Watts, an impoverished Los Angeles ghetto, exploded into a six-day urban riot that left thirty-four people dead and a thousand wounded. Brown's response was at best too little too late, and the white backlash combined with blue-collar anger over rising taxes led to Brown's overwhelming defeat for a third term to Ronald Reagan.

Although Brown's son, Jerry, was elected governor in 1974, the elder Brown never returned to politics. He died at age ninety in 1996 and the Monsignor who officiated at the funeral remembered Brown as a man "who loved people genuinely ... He cared for their needs, their welfare, their pain." While the reader of this impressive narrative might hope for more details about Brown's personal life, this book is a fascinating account of the modern California dream era and the man who presided over it.

Karl Helicher